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Sins of the Mothers

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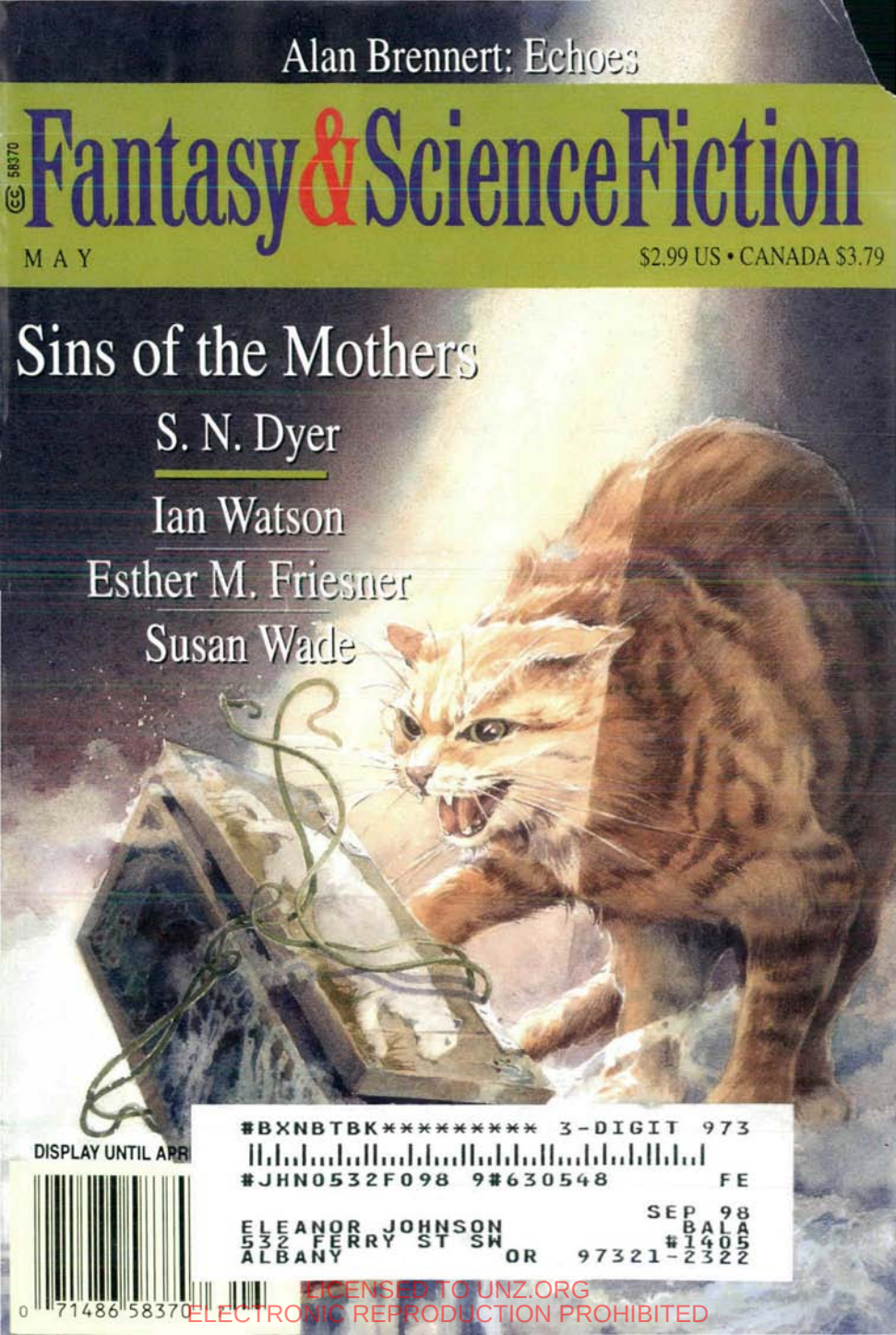

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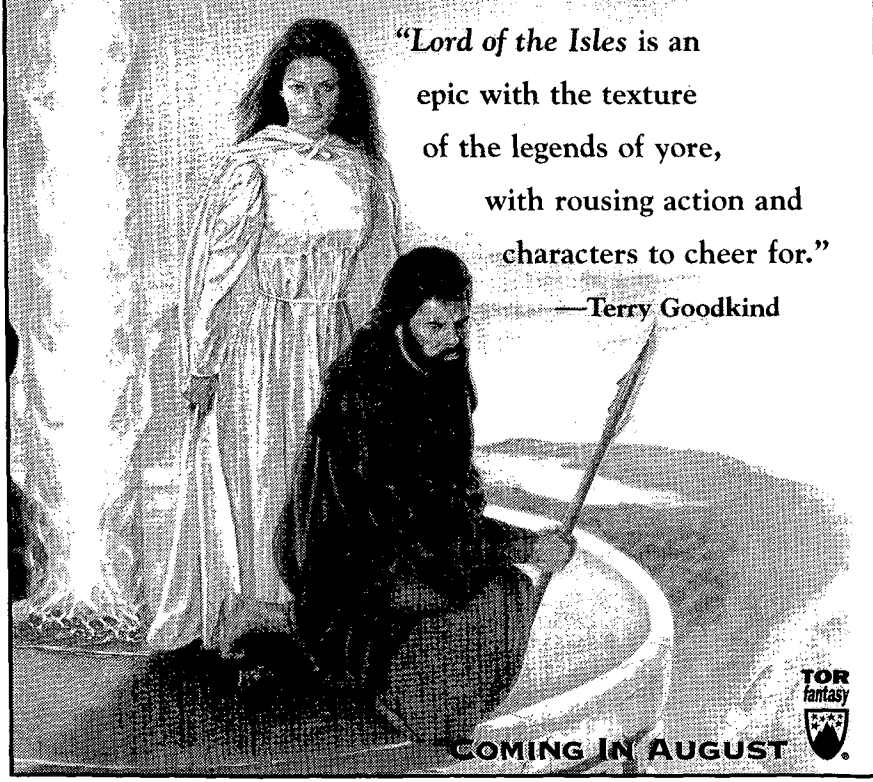

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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NOVELETS

A RECENT VINTAGE 25 Susan Wade
MISS THING 72 Esther M. Friesner
TALLY 105 Deborah Coates
ECHOES 131 Alan Brennert

SHORT STORIES

SINS OF THE MOTHERS 7 S. N. Dyer
JINX 58 Leo Kenden
THE LAST BEAST OUT OF THE BOX 91 Ian Watson

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 20 Charles de Lint
BRIEF REVIEWS 70
GUILTY PLEASURES 125 Michelle West

CARTOONS: D. Barstow (6); Bill Long (24); John Jonik (57); Henry Martin (130).
COVER BY GARY A. LIPPINCOTT FOR "THE LAST BEAST OUT OF THE BOX."

EDWARD L. FERMAN, Publisher — KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH, Editor
CHERYL CASS, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Assistant Publisher
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GENERAL OFFICE: 143 CREAM HILL RD., WEST CORNWALL, CT 06796
EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 1806, MADISON SQUARE STATION, NEW YORK, NY 10159

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I'VE BEEN dreading writing this editorial for several months. It is, in a way, a good-bye editorial. You see, in September I resigned as *F&SF's* editor in order to pursue my writing career, and since that day, I have known I had to write this editorial. I wasn't sure when. But I knew that once I did, our monthly chats would end.

The transition from my editorship to the start of the new editorship has taken almost five months. It is January as I write this, and this issue will be my last. Next month, Gordon Van Gelder will introduce himself to you. Gordon has been an editor for St. Martin's Press for several years. He has edited novels by *F&SF* favorites from Kate Wilhelm to Bradley Denton. He is the acquiring editor for both *The Year's Best Science Fiction* and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. And he's been the acquiring editor on two anthologies that I had a part in: *The Best of Pulphouse* and *The Best from Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

I've been editing *F&SF* for six years. I can't say that I've enjoyed every minute of it. There are unpleasant parts to editing, such as telling a writer that his story simply doesn't (and never will) work. But the unpleasantness is only a minor part of the job.

I have loved discovering and sharing the work of new writers. I've enjoyed reading stories so powerful that I couldn't speak when I finished them, and knowing I could share them with you. And I've enjoyed this six-year-long chat we've had.

Our monthly chats will end, but that doesn't mean the conversation is over. When I was hired at *F&SF*, I was already a published fiction writer with a growing career. Most of the attention I received on my writing was based on my short fiction. My first novel, *The White Mists of Power*, appeared

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shortly after I started editing *F&SF*. I have continued to write novels (My most recent fantasy novel, *The Fey: Rival*, will come out in April, and a mainstream hardcover, *Hitler's Angel*, will appear in June), but somewhere along the way I lost my desire to write short fiction. I believe that was because I had immersed myself in short stories — and I was putting my creative short story energy into the magazine.

I wrote my first short story when I was seven, and have made my living at writing since college. Editing *F&SF* has been a part-time job, done for the love of it instead of the income base. But the time has finally come where I had to choose: do I want to be a novelist and a magazine editor for the rest of my life? Or do I want to write novels, short stories, and articles in whatever genres I want, whenever I want?

I chose the writing because it is what I do, and what I have wanted to do since I learned to read. Editing has been fun, and I'll miss it, but it was never a dream of mine. And I believe that people should always try to live out their dreams.

So, as I said, the chats will continue, but they'll be different, less focused, and sometimes more obtuse. I won't be writing a monthly essay any more,* although you will see more of my short fiction. As the transition has finalized, I've had more writing time, and I've written ten short stories in the last two months. (Some will appear in these pages.) I will do an occasional essay or letter of comment in the various genre magazines because I'm opinionated and can't help but express myself. And of course, I will continue doing novels which are, however obliquely, part of the conversation as well.

I might even edit an anthology or two, but that will have to wait until I've rested a bit. But I won't edit a genre magazine again. No other working experience could be better than the one I've had with Ed Ferman, this magazine's publisher and former editor. And every other magazine would pale in comparison to *F&SF*.

I will miss working with the writers, and discovering the new ones. But most of all, I will miss sharing the stories with you. The stories I've bought for the magazine in the last six years have been the ones that have made me laugh and cry, the ones that made me get up from my desk and demand that someone else read this *now*. Pity

*Except at my web site. Please visit www.horrornet.com/rusch.htp

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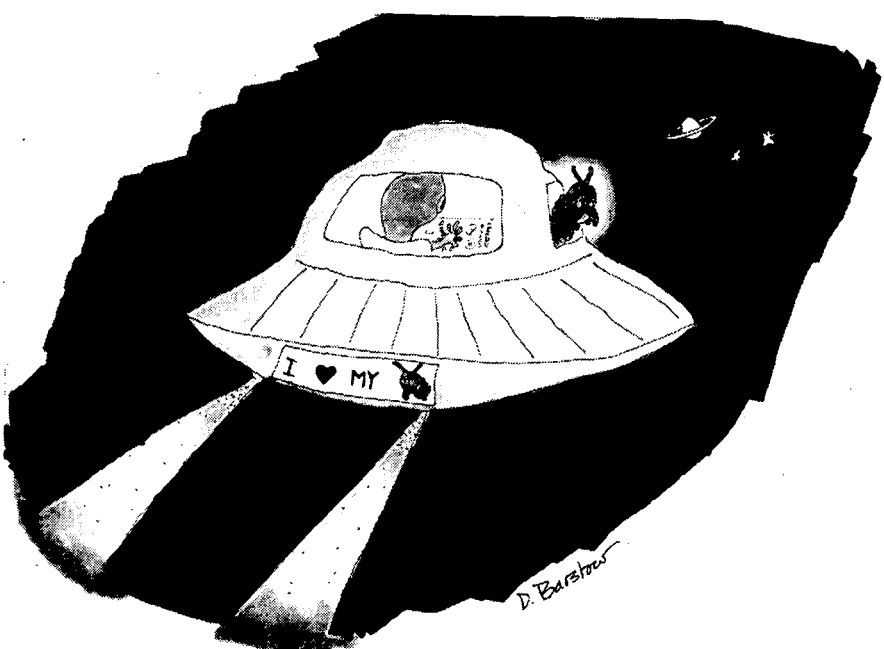
my poor husband. I'm sure I'll be shoving more stories under his nose because I know that I can't share them with other people as easily anymore.

Thanks for reading and responding to the fiction. Thanks for coming along on this journey. I'll miss communicating with you every month, but let's touch base every now and then.

And of course, I'll continue reading *F&SF* just like you will. So if we ever do meet in person, we will always have something to talk about.

NEW EDITORIAL ADDRESS:
Gordon Van Gelder, Editor
The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction
P.O. Box 1806
Madison Square Station
New York, NY 10159



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S.N. Dyer has written over forty short stories and one collaborative novel, all under various names. She has been nominated for several awards, including the Nebula for her powerful story, "The July Ward."

"Sins of the Mothers" is equally powerful. And very disturbing.

Sins of the Mothers

By S. N. Dyer

I WAS ON THE FRONT PORCH, drinking espresso and watching birds squabble at the feeder. It was late autumn; the apple and cherry trees had dutifully dropped their leaves and stood naked beside the evergreens. Otherwise, the only way to tell the closeness of winter on my two acres of California was by the incredible fruitfulness of the garden. I looked forward to the first good frost, which would relieve me of the need to go out every day and find homes for tomatoes and zucchini with friends who already had too many of their own. Compared to that, giving away the last litter of kittens had been a snap. I've considered imitating a desperate friend, who abandons baskets of produce on the doorsteps of strangers.

A limousine pulled up to the gate. One of those rented jobs, a chauffeur in front. Two biker goons got out. Leather and chain berserkers in a stretch Cadillac. Probably lost and needing directions to one of the illegal dope farms for which our county is famous.

Then another man emerged. Slim, dissipated, a light Italian suit with

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no shirt. Long hair limp and dirty. *Evan* something or other. I recognized him from channel surfing past MTV. He was evidently big with Beavis and Butt-Head.

He slipped inside the gate and walked up to the house. The dogs paced beside him, neither friendly nor unfriendly, like cops at a peaceful demonstration.

He stopped and looked up at me. "Hello. You're Arwen Wildflower?"

Okay, the name seemed cool when I was a sixteen-year-old runaway with flowers in my hair. And now I'm stuck with it.

"The former Shirley O'Malley?"

I hadn't heard that name since 1969. A little knot of paranoia began to form somewhere under my cotton and lace peasant shirt. "Maybe. What's it to you?"

The rock star tried to smile with a face accustomed to leers and smirks. His face got sort of crooked and he showed bad teeth.

"You're my mother," he said.

Shit. It's not like I'd been spending the last quarter century anticipating this Hallmark Moment.

I stood up and pointed into the house. "Want some espresso?"

My cat loves her babies; I once saw her attack a Doberman who got too close. The Doberman lost. But once the kittens hit puberty she won't have a thing to do with them, even chases them away. And she seems, in general, to be a better mom than my German shepherd, my quarter horse, my cow.

And then there's the birds. They'll die defending their nest — but if a baby falls out and lies there chirping, they just sit there and watch it die.

Motherhood. Donna Reed and Harriet Nelson and Jane Anderson tried to convince me it was the only reason I existed. Get born, grow up, get pregnant, have babies, raise them, have grandchildren, die. The last three thousand years of philosophy might have meant something to the lives of men, but my future was meant to be as uncomplicated as a brood mare's.

Maybe if everything had gone as planned I'd still be in Ohio, married, housewife, two sons in college, two daughters starting their own families. More likely I'd be divorced, trying to raise all those kids on minimum

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wage and minuscule child support, while my ex-husband the dentist drove his new wife around in a Lotus sport.

In fact, I bet Donna Reed's doctor divorced her for a trophy wife, and Harriet's raising grandchildren on her Social Security check, and Jane's in a nursing home that her kids never visit.

The rock star sat at my kitchen table and briefly fooled with one of the dulcimers I build. He had musical talent — not that you could tell from his videos.

"You need something," I said.

"A guy can't wonder about his real mother?"

I shrugged. "You're twenty-five and look forty, you're covered with needle tracks and the kind of tattoos you have to be very drunk to hold still for...You don't strike me as the sentimental kind."

He grinned. "Right. You dropped me like a dog taking a dump and ran. My adoptive family raised me to be a little Republican 'til I was old enough to smoke and drink and screw around, and then they ditched me too.... I don't need anyone."

Like I said, a real Hallmark Moment.

"So what is it, bone marrow?"

"Close. How'd you like fifty grand?"

Well hell. How'd I like to pay off the mortgage and the back debts? Selling homemade berry jam and dulcimers, and playing flute in classy restaurants for tips isn't exactly financial security.

"What for?"

"Something you aren't using. Your eggs."

Sometimes — not often — I'd lie there in the night and wonder how my kid had turned out. I never regretted not raising him on my own. That wasn't one of the options you had in 1969.

Besides, I never liked kids. I hated baby-sitting, hated being at the kids' table at holiday dinners, didn't even think babies were cute. They were smelly and formless and boring. Until they got big enough to be smelly and unintelligible and demanding. Even now when some friend's two-year-old starts talking to me, I nod and fix a smile on my face and pray someone will rescue me.

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Maybe if I'd met Mr. Right and lived a normal middle-class life I'd have eventually wanted to reproduce, and maybe I'd have wound up loving my kids the same way I get attached to stray cats. But I suspect I would have been a lousy mom, abusive or at best neglectful. Strung out on whatever prescription tranquilizer was *au courant*. Building job security for my kids' future psychotherapists.

When I wondered about my kid, I figured he'd have musical talent, like me, and like me at some point he might start thinking there was more to life than money and status and predictability.

Only when I discovered music in the Sixties it came with a philosophical background of love and peace. When Evan's time rolled around it was just sex 'n' drugs 'n' rock 'n' roll. Live fast, die young, leave a burned-out body.

At twenty-five, when most kids from his background were finishing law or medical school, starting a career and a family, he'd somehow managed to get such bad alcoholic pancreatitis that now he was diabetic and dying. A real overachiever.

"I don't do well with insulin," he said. The groupies and the drugs tended to interfere with a regular diet and medication regimen. So it was in and out of hospitals with the various forms of diabetic coma.

"The docs say I have a year to live, maybe less. Maybe more if I clean up my act." He snorted derisively. *Yeah, like that could happen.*

I nodded, trying to look sympathetic. I've seen friends lose children; it seems like the worst thing that can happen. They never recover. Years later they're still haunted and bitter. It makes you wonder how people ever survived, back when half your kids routinely died.

Yet here my own son had just told me his death sentence, and it affected me no more than the news of the latest flood in Bangladesh: too bad, what's for dinner? He was a stranger to me.

"My only hope," he continued, "is a pancreas transplant."

"Well, go for it."

"It's not feasible," he said. "See, you have to at least pretend to clean up your act, something I'm no good at. Then you have to wait for someone right to die, and you take all these immunosuppressive drugs that make life unpleasant."

"Okay, so is this some find-yourself-before-you-die trip?"

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He snorted again. "No way. I've got too much money to die. I'm going for the best transplant — from my own body. From a clone."

He'd brought a video with his pet scientists giving the pitch. While I watched, he prowled around the house looking at pictures, noodling on my guitar, hassling the pets. I'd have been nervous if I'd had anything worth stealing.

I'd never thought about clones. I'd seen enough *Star Trek* to figure you just took any old cell from the human body — even hair or skin or blood, which it turns out don't even have enough DNA to work with — and grow one.

But it seems that only germ cells — eggs and sperm — have the appropriate DNA. Chromosomes are modified with methylation so the DNA of each cell line turns on in a specific way. That way liver cells can't grow into spleen cells, let alone become a baby.

To make matters more confused, even the chromosomes from egg or sperm alone aren't enough. There's something called genetic imprinting, meaning that you need both male and female contribution for the baby to turn out right. In illustration, the scientist went on and on about what happens when someone gets a wrong set of chromosome 14. If both come from Mom — it's called uniparental disomy, in the unlikely event anyone cares — the kid gets Prader Willi and he's retarded and fat. If both chromosomes come from Dad, then the kid has Angelman's syndrome, retarded and autistic.

The whole thing was incredibly complex, and since my tenth grade bio was back in the dark ages I was lost.

I understood the bottom line, though. They needed *my* germ cell chromosomes to build a copy of Evan.

They'd give me a drug to make a bunch of eggs mature simultaneously, then harvest them laparascopically — Band-aid surgery. Then they'd separate out the chromosomes they needed — the explanation for that was so technical I zoned out completely — and then add the dad's contribution, appropriate male chromosomes harvested from Evan.

"Whoa, more than Oedipal," I remarked to the video.

They'd implant the fertilized egg in a host mother and let it grow. Just before six months they'd do a hysterectomy/abortion, dissect out the pancreas, and transplant the tiny islets of Langerhans into Evan, curing his

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diabetes. His own cells — a perfect match. He wouldn't need any immune suppressants.

"Two things," I told him after I'd stared at the blank TV a while. "You can have the eggs. I'm not exactly using them. But I also want to be the host." I could use a hysterectomy. Menstruation has always struck me as a sexist God's punishment for lack of reproduction, and I was sick and tired of it. "Package deal, half a million bucks."

We haggled a couple hours, settled on a quarter million, and called the lawyers.

Two months later I was pregnant. *Deja vu.*

"I'm pregnant," said my friend Mary.

"You can't be!" We were whispering in the school rest room. She'd been puking, and I was supposed to be helping her get to the school nurse. "I mean, you can't get pregnant if you haven't..."

"I have."

"Wow." That stopped me. Back then, no one did.

"My folks'll kill me."

I didn't doubt it.

The father was one of the hippie poets in our class. He was terrified. Knocking someone up was grounds for reform school. For the girl it was a shotgun marriage, or an extended trip to some fictional relative out of state. In any event, you were grounded for the rest of your life.

Good girls didn't have sex. Everyone knew that. So if you did, and people found out, you were doomed. You'd never get a job or married. No decent person — including your own family — would ever talk to you again. You'd wind up a hooker in a seaport town, and die of degradation or booze. No second chances. Absolute ruin.

The hippie poet got some money and found a guy who'd "take care of it." I borrowed the car, said we were going to the football game, and drove to the sleazy side of town. The father was too chicken to come along. He said he had to meditate.

Nowadays when you think of abortions, you think of a nice clean clinic with doctors, nurses, anesthesia, and assholes picketing outside. Back then abortions were in someone's kitchen, so dirty you would have refused to eat there let alone have surgery, and a guy with thick glasses and

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poor personal hygiene who claimed he knew how to do it. You didn't ask for credentials.

Mary got up on the table and spread her legs. She was crying.

"Shut up," he said offhandedly. "Hold her."

He had a metal speculum, not very shiny, and a few surgical tools that he wiped off with rubbing alcohol. Mary screamed.

"If you do that again, I'll stop."

She screamed again.

"Shut up, stupid bitch," he remarked. I was feeling pretty sick myself, and my hands hurt from where Mary was squeezing them. I gave her a rolled up handkerchief to bite.

All in all, it wasn't much more sophisticated than a coat hanger. "You'll bleed for a few days," he said. "Tell anyone and I'll kill you."

"You have a lousy bedside manner," I told him as we left. That struck him as funny. I heard him laughing halfway down the stairs.

Mary bled all over the front seat. Try explaining that to your parents.

THE WORST BIT about being pregnant is the morning sickness. That sudden queasy feeling and, if you're lucky, a successful sprint for the toilet. Otherwise you just sit there and hate being alive and get sicker at the thought of food.

That was how I knew I was pregnant last time. I knew this time when I woke up puking.

I called the mad doctor in charge of the program. Frankie, I called him; he looked a little like a grown-up Frankie Avalon playing Dr. Frankenstein.

"I think I've got morning sickness."

"Great!"

"Easy for you to say."

"No, this means it took. You're pregnant."

"Look, just get me some phenergan or something."

"No, nothing that could cause birth defects."

"Who cares about that stuff? So it can screw up the heart or make the kid retarded — it's not like that matters. I want something for nausea!"

"No drugs. You're pregnant, remember?"

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At that point I dropped the phone and ran for the sink. Frankie waited on the line, which ticked me off — it was long distance and I was paying.

I'd been playing guitar when Mary came over. I could play the folkie stuff, as long as none of it was anti-war, while my parents were home, but I had to save protest or hard-line rock for when they were out playing bridge.

"You don't look good."

"I'm sick," she moaned. She was hot to the touch, and she felt clammy and smelled bad.

"I'm still bleeding."

"He said you'd do that for a while."

"Yeah, but it's black and kind of stringy."

"Yuck.... Maybe something's gone, you know, wrong. We could go to the hospital."

"No! They'd find out.... I'll be okay. I just need to sleep, okay? Play some Dylan."

So I played "The Times They Are a Changing," which was our favorite because it stated the obvious, that our parents didn't know what we were up to, and "Subterranean Homesick Blues." She seemed to be asleep and then she had a seizure. I called the ambulance, but it was all over when they got there.

The cops grilled me, but I denied knowing anything. I got grounded for a month, anyway. I felt guilty, too. A couple years ago I told my doctor about it. "What if I'd made her go to the hospital, instead of waiting?"

"She'd have died anyway. Don't let it bother you."

Like you can let it not bother you, watching your best friend die on your bed from a botched abortion. Doctors are like that.

ROCK STAR CLONED! NATURAL MOTHER CARRIES TINY METAL MAN.

The last people you'd expect to break a real story... I found out at the supermarket checkout stand, where I was loading up on Seven-up and soda crackers. It took reporters a while after that to locate me and expose my entire sleazy life story. No onus involved in getting pregnant when I was

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sixteen. No, now I was to be pilloried for not raising the kid. *Plus ça change, plus c'est le même chose.*

"How did it feel to give up your baby at birth?"

"I dunno, how did it feel to give up your journalistic integrity?"

A roadie had broke the story for ten grand. Evan's bikers broke him. Then Evan sent one of his toughs to keep reporters away from me. It was a real sweet gesture.

The biker's name was Tony. He was my age and on the wagon due to a mild case of cirrhosis and a moderate case of chronic bronchitis. Bikers have an early expiration date. Tony had a degree in philosophy from a midwest aggie college, had learned to smoke and drink and shoot up in Nam, and had detoxed during his last stay in jail. His goal, he said, was to own a bar. Or a real old Harley.

He had a lot of interesting tattoos. We got friendly, and he showed them all to me.

I used to hang out at the record store and listen to all the new stuff as it came in. I loved the Doors, Hendrix, the psychedelics. There was this college guy working there that summer, and he liked the same groups I did.

One day I was in the booth listening to the new Cream when he told me he had a bootleg Dylan tape. Wow! It was illegal, but I could come over to his pad and listen....

This was still the Sixties. Girls didn't go to a guy's place to hear music. Guys then thought, you know, that if you came to their room it meant you were going to sleep with them.

They thought that if you said, yeah, you'd try some wine, you were going to sleep with them.

They thought if you said *No* it meant *Yes*, you were going to sleep with them.

They thought that it was no fun having sex with a virgin, it was a dirty job but someone had to do it. Sort of a civic duty.

So it was the worst afternoon of my life. And the guy came out of it feeling like a boy scout who'd just helped an old lady across the street.

The problem with beating up goons is it just makes them mad. So Evan's roadie called the reporters from the hospital and told them the

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whole story. I wasn't bearing Evan's clone because I was some California weirdo who never had the chance to raise her kid the first time. I was growing an organ donor.

Now it wasn't only reporters camping outside my place, scaring the livestock, running over my cat, annoying the hell out of the neighbors. It was right-to-life fanatics too. They called me names you can't repeat in public even now. They threatened to kill me. Real life-affirming Christian types.

We hired rent-a-cops, changed my phone number, checked all mail for explosives. Tony and I alternated days of hiding in the house with days of sitting on the hood of my car and yelling back.

I was showing by then, wearing stretch pants and waddling when I went to feed the horse.

I'd bred her seven times. I was convinced she was smirking at me. Now I'd know what a pain motherhood was.

I didn't tell Mom and Dad about the rape. See, it didn't matter if you'd done it on purpose or not, ruin was ruin. I wasn't a virgin anymore, and that meant I was evil. A disgrace to the family. A whore.

Besides, I knew they'd take his side. I'd gone over to a guy's house to hear a bootleg Dylan tape. I'd asked for it!

I kept it secret because I didn't have a choice. When I'd gone without my period for two months and started puking every morning I knew I was doomed. I couldn't do what Mary'd done. I was too chicken. But it didn't matter, my parents would kill me anyway. And I deserved it.

Frankie called me. "We've got a little problem," he said. Namely his lab had been firebombed. It was almost funny. He was a fertility specialist. Other than his little deal with Evan, the vast majority of his work was devoted to helping people have babies. That 99 percent of his career goals coincided with theirs didn't stop the nuts from targeting him.

"And the hospital won't let me operate," he said.

"Find one that will." Evan had enough money, someone would give Frankie temporary privileges long enough for one lousy hysterectomy.

Then came the injunction.

I thought, you know, I'm an adult. I can do what I want with my body.

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No total stranger can go to court and sue for guardianship of a lump of tissue in my uterus.

Boy, was I naive.

Time was running out. It was five months. At six the annoying growth became a legal person, and I'd be stuck with him. *Shit.*

We had lawyers, they had lawyers. They dressed like yuppies and bragged like TV wrestlers before a match. That didn't give me much confidence.

I was sent to visit "Aunt Martha in Missouri." I had no Aunt Martha in Missouri. What I had was a concentration camp where you did chores and got moral lectures from the nuns, with schoolwork in whatever spare time was left. By the time they were done with you, you had no doubt that you were a worthless piece of shit doomed to hell in this world and beyond. Unless you decided to become a nun yourself, and atone by making other unlucky girls miserable.

Some people glow when they're pregnant. Some people say it's the best time of their life. I figure they must be insane. Even if you want the kid there's the nausea, the back pain, the forty extra pounds weighing you down. All leading up to the delightful experience of trying to shove an object the size of a watermelon through a hole the size of a needle.

I did it without anesthesia. Without the support of anyone who thought of me as anything more than a moral lesson.

On the upside, it's very easy to escape from a maternity hospital. No one expects it.

It's also easy to hitchhike to the Haight Ashbury, to change your name, to move into a commune and learn to make dulcimers and jam. It's easy to build a new life — until the old one finally catches up with you.

Pregnancy sucked when I was sixteen. The second time was worse. My back was already bad, my ankles swollen anyway; I didn't need the additional stress.

"If I don't get rid of this fetus next week, I'm going to be stuck with it," I said. We were all at my kitchen table, having a war conference.

"Don't worry, we'll take care of it," said the lawyer.

"So you've said. For three months. Why am I not reassured?"

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"I need this damn clone," said Evan. "I'm dying, remember?"

"Worse comes to worst," said Tony, "we head to Mexico and get the surgery there."

"There's an injunction against me leaving the state."

"I've got a friend who smuggles dope, he'll fly us." Tony was very resourceful. "If we can't come back, hell, money goes further down there. I know some friends with a cantina in Baja." Practical too.

"I'm an officer of the court, don't say anything about breaking injunctions in front of me," said the lawyer. "I have a friend in San Diego who does a lot of work across the border, I could call him..."

"I need a drink," said Evan.

So we got in Tony's pickup truck and drove through the demonstrators to a crummy bar on the outskirts of town.

"I'm having a drink," I said.

"You're pregnant. You can't drink."

"Pregnant women have had a drink since the dawn of time and it hasn't hurt a damn thing. Gimme a bourbon."

For some reason this really ticked off Evan. "You bitch, did you drink when you were pregnant with me? Is that why I'm all screwed up?"

"Trust me, I would of if I could of."

"Oh yeah, you'd have liked it if I'd been retarded or had three arms or something."

"You can't hold your liquor," I said. "You never got that from me."

"What did I get from you?" Evan screamed. "A shitty life in the suburbs and a mom who never wanted me..."

"You can't speak to your mother like that," said Tony.

"I can say anything I want. I own you. Own you all!"

So Tony hit him over the head with a pool cue. And ran like hell. You shouldn't annoy a biker, even when he's sober.

The only TV shows the nuns let us watch were *The Flying Nun* and *Bewitched*. I still can't watch *Bewitched*. Think about it. The woman is a witch. When she gets married she's expected to give up her identity, her entire self, and just be a housewife. Whenever she does something bright, fixes things, she's betraying her husband. Go figure.

All I can do now is watch TV and hope the rent-a-cops keep the loonies

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out. Last week a drive-by maniac shot one of my dogs. Life-affirming, huh?

I got a postcard yesterday from Tony, somewhere down in Baja. Says he's drinking again, and woke up one day to find himself married and teaching philosophy to high school students. And I thought my life was hell.

I'm so damn pregnant I can barely move. I look like a balloon about to pop. Social Services tried to get me to go to Lamaze classes. I told them to get bent.

The baby will come. That's the thing about life, once that sperm hits that egg you've got no choice about it. You're going to take a risk and hurt like hell whatever way you go.

The lawyers are still fighting. Only now Evan's lawyers are squabbling with his adopted parents' lawyers over the estate. The baby could be born with a silver spoon up his nose. It seems that maybe the fetus is Evan's real heir — it's not only his illegitimate kid, but genetically it *is* him. This should break legal ground, they tell me. I could care less.

Some friends of mine, the ones who own the restaurant I play flute in, are desperate to have a kid. I don't know why, it's something genetic, I guess. But they like jam and dulcimers and stray dogs, so I've promised them the baby. If they get twenty million bucks with it, hey, good karma comes back to you.

I didn't want the kid twenty-five years ago, and I don't want him now. It's just that last time, society screwed me. This time, I did it to myself.

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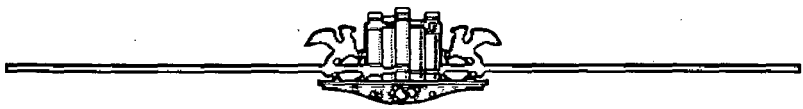

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Ticktock, by Dean Koontz, Ballantine, 1997, $7.99

DEAN KOONTZ has always been a genre-bending author (and let's hope a typo doesn't show up in that description or I could be in trouble), but not always a successful one. The lack of success of his earlier books (at one point one of his pseudonyms was selling better than he was) didn't have so much to do with the quality of his work as that it simply took the publishing field a while to catch up with he does. The pundits would try to tell him that you can't mix science fiction with a contemporary thriller, or humor with suspense, but he'd do it anyway and the readers loved it, leaving those same pundits to scratch their heads.

So I can just imagine what they'd have to say about the mix of a classic screwball comedy and a contemporary fantasy thriller — especially when Koontz remains true to both forms, as he does here in his new novel. For make no mistake about it: this is a hilarious book that will keep you on the edge of your seat.

The basic plot boils down to Tommy Phan coming home in his brand-new car to find a strange little doll lying on his doorstep. It has a note pinned to it, written in Vietnamese, but Tommy can't read it because, unlike the rest of his family, he has embraced all things American and hasn't kept up with his own culture. What he does soon realize, however, is that the doll hides a vicious creature inside it and the creature means to kill him — unless he can survive until dawn. This is more difficult than one would assume, because the creature is both highly intelligent, outthinking Tommy at every turn, and growing larger all the time.

To be honest, the couple of chapters in which the above take place are the weakest in the book.

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Necessary, to set up the plot, certainly, but not nearly as rich in character detail as the opening chapters with Tommy talking to his traditionalist mother on his car phone, nor as hysterically funny and lightning-paced as the remainder of the book. Once Tommy gets out of the house and runs into Deliverance Payne, a wise-cracking, extremely competent young woman who exasperates Tommy as much as she fascinates him, there's not a dull moment in the book.

Coming as it does after the excellent, but much grimmer stories Koontz had to tell in *Dark Rivers of the Heart* (Knopf, 1994) and *Intensity* (Knopf, 1995), *Ticktock* is like that shaft of sunlight coming through an overhang of storm clouds. Welcome. Hopeful. And an utter delight.

If you've never tried Koontz, this one's the place to start. It's easily my favorite of his books to date and one that I know I'll reread — for the same reasons I reread P.G. Wodehouse or Thorne Smith. Because while it's important to shine a light on the darkness and keep the dialogue open concerning the problems we all face, it's also important to have some fun. And *Ticktock* is so much fun that my cheeks are still sore from smiling.

Kings of the High Frontier, by Victor Koman, Pulpless.Com, 1996, $3.50

Available on the Internet at: http://www.pulpless.com/king.html

There are probably all sorts of novels available on the Internet, but I find it fitting that the first one I've come across is a science fiction novel. Our genre is, after all, often considered to be the literature of ideas, and what could be a more science fictional idea than a novel that only exists somewhere in cyberspace, or as pixels on a computer screen?

I'll admit it's difficult to curl up in your favorite reading chair with a book like this. Even after it's made a run through my printer, I still have this sheaf of loose papers to deal with, but the bottom line of any book isn't how is it presented, but how good is it? Quite frankly, no matter how much the idea of a book only published on the Internet intrigues me, if the writing and story don't hold my attention it might as well only be available on Mars.

But this is Victor Koman, and if his name doesn't act as a touchstone for a good read to you, it does to me. I still remember *The Jehovah Contract* and *Soloman's Knife*

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as high points on my reading list in the years they were published, and while it's been half a decade since I've seen anything new by Koman, like Rick McCammon, his name continues to come up in bookish discussions with friends under headings such as "When will we see something new from this writer?" and "Why the long delay between books?"

Now I know. For the past five years or so, it appears, Koman has been hard at work on this splendid new book, *Kings of the High Frontier.*

It's a hard science novel of the kind we don't see enough of anymore, postulating a version of our world that sees a sudden instance of "steam engine time," except here it might be better termed "spacecraft time."

In the wake of a new disaster with NASA's shuttle, and a bill going before the United Nations that will see all space travel regulated by the UN, men and women are building their own spacecraft in various parts of the world. Some are civilians, some ex-military, some ex-NASA — there are even a group of university students, including a descendant of Davy Crockett. Their designs are revolutionary, but only in that they're extremely cost-efficient compared to NASA's monolithic program, and they promise to do what the Space Program appears to have forgotten: get mankind off the planet.

The craft are being built in the American Southwest, in Africa, in a demilitarized Russia, in a secret US military installation...even one in an abandoned factory in the middle of a New York City slum. The men and women responsible are dreamers, seeking to recapture the lost promise of the first manned space flights when it seemed that space stations and colonization of other planets were only a few decades away.

The cast of Koman's novel is large, almost unwieldy at times, but the further we get into the book, the more familiar they become, and the more we are caught up in their dreams and struggles. The various spacecraft are lovingly detailed, utilizing both contemporary technology and classic designs, and we watch each of them being built under such a close eye, that we feel we have as much of a stake in them as do the book's characters. There are any number of plot twists and turns — far too many to properly convey in the space we have here — but if you ever shared the dream of manned space flight, imagined it

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could be you heading up there into orbit and beyond, then you'll love this book.

Kings of the High Frontier is an intriguing, exhilarating, thought-provoking and, yes, sprawling novel that brings back the sense of wonder that drew so many of us into science fiction in the first place. Unfortunately, at this point in time, it's only available on the Internet at:

http://www.pulpless.com/king.html

The website you reach has cover art for Koman's book, along with the other titles Pulpless.Com electronically publishes. You can download a sample section for free, or the whole book for a nominal sum which works out to be less than the price of a slim paperback. Once you've got it on your computer, you can read it using your Internet browser or print it out. Which brings us back to the whole idea of books being available on the Internet.

I'm really of two minds when it comes to this sort of thing. On the one hand, I like the idea of a publishing medium being so readily available to anyone with a computer. Perhaps one day all books will be available in such a manner. There'll be no more worrying about the book being out-of-stock at the bookstore, or signed out by someone else at the library, just when we want to read it. We won't have the frustration of discovering a new writer, only to find that all of their earlier books are out-of-print.

But what about those who can't afford a computer, never mind Internet access? What I enjoy about books — besides the simple tactile pleasure of its shape and weight in my hands as I read it — is that I know anyone can go into a library and read one. You can be poor, you can be homeless, but you still have access to the written word because of the public library system. If publishing were to turn solely to what can be read on a computer screen, it would create yet one more divisive barrier between the haves and the have-nots.

Still, I doubt that will happen anytime soon. Until screen-reading devices become so cheap that one can, say, leave them on the beach while one swims and not have to worry about them being stolen, or getting sand in the workings, then books as we know them will still be with us. For now, Internet publishing will remain the province of the "difficult" books — the ones that can't find a niche, or take an unpopular political stand, or have been

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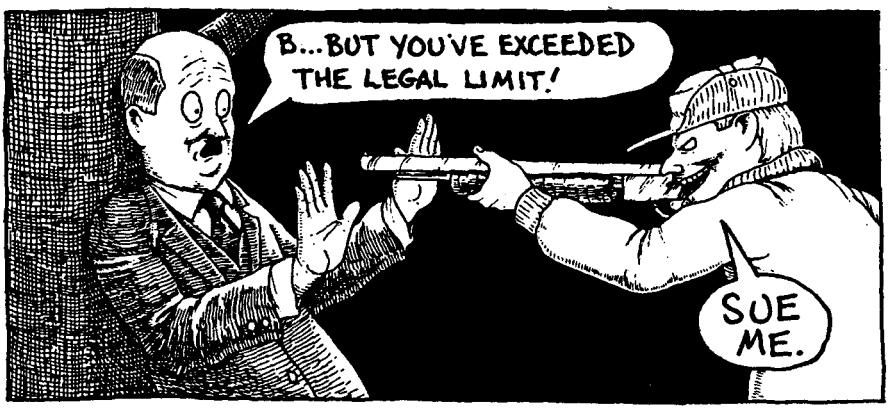
written by an author that the publisher feels might not have a large enough built-in readership for them to risk publishing it.

Perhaps if enough people download it, Koman's book will find a paper publisher so that it can reach even more readers. And with enough interest (read: a publisher prepared to offer him an advance so he can afford to), he'll be able to write another installment, answering the equally fascinating question, And then what happened?

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

SPECULATIONS

THE POPULATION OF LAWYERS WILL OUTSTRIP FORAGE AND A SHORT HUNTING SEASON WILL BE DECLARED...



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Susan Wade's fiction last appeared in our July 1995 issue. Since then, Bantam Books published her first novel. Walking Rain *revolves around a lonely potter's long-delayed homecoming, an unresolved hate crime, and family ghosts. It's highly recommended.*

"A Recent Vintage" also deals with home and memory and ghosts — but they are of a different type.

A Recent Vintage

By Susan Wade

THE SHATTERED GLASS glittered like fairy dust against the black asphalt. Natalie pushed herself back to a run, even though she was just finishing the cool-down after her daily ritual. Half a dozen people — her neighbors? — stood talking on the sidewalk next to her parked car. The red '67 Mustang sported a fresh tattoo of bullet holes along the driver's side door.

"What happened?" Natalie said. She was breathless from running and her ponytail was sticky against the back of her neck. It was dusk, the front edge of summer, and the evening breathed warm sweet air against her face.

A tall man said, "We heard the shots and came out. A car was pulling away, but all we could see was it was big and dark. Looked like an older car."

A blond man added, "American make, I think. We couldn't get the license number. Sorry."

Natalie looked at the door of her car more closely, then touched the bullet holes. Cleanly pierced, they were half again as wide as her fingertip.

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For a dizzy instant, she tasted sheared metal. With a jolt, a memory caught her: *blurred images of a golden-haired man shoving another man against the fender, shouting, "Stay away from her, damn you! You're taking her over, trying to own her — if you come here again I'll kill you!" Spit flew from his mouth as he yelled, sparkled on his chipped front tooth. A sickening crunch as the other man was slammed against the fender again, colorless hair whipping around his face, fingers curling around the antenna, bones cracking —*

Natalie jerked her hand away. She'd never remembered that before. She stood there, blinking at the three neat holes in the car door and fender, low, near the tire well. And a fourth shot to knock out the window, she realized.

"Your insurance will cover it," the blond man said.

"You got insurance?" the taller man asked.

"I — " She stopped. "I don't remember."

The blond man opened the passenger door. A shower of glass bits fell out, a shimmering rain that was faintly blue-green. He stepped over them, opened the glove compartment, and removed some papers. "Here's a policy — looks like you do," he said.

Natalie bent down and picked up three of the glass shards. She cupped them in her left palm and examined them. They were rough ovoids, almost as thick as they were long. Sunlight glinted from them; the sparkle mesmerized her.

"You hear them shots?" said one of the neighbors, a short plump woman with curly dark hair. "Sound just like firecrackers, 'pop-pop, pop-pop.' You know, I just about forgot how a gun sound. I called the cops."

Natalie nodded. "Okay."

The woman held out her hand. "I'm Mary," she said. "You doing okay? You looking pale."

Natalie had taken Mary's hand reflexively. She shook hands and started to let go, but Mary put her other hand over Natalie's and patted.

"Need to get you a charm or something, maybe a blue bead for your car, ward off the evil eye, you know."

"Maybe so," Natalie said.

"You looking pale," the woman repeated.

"I —oh. I guess I do feel a little clammy."

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Mary helped her sit on the curb and said, "Put your head down."

Natalie did. The throb of her heartbeat in her ears sounded like the rush of enormous wings. Her evening routine had shattered like the window. She stared at the star-like shimmer of glass on the pavement and wondered what was going to happen.

The police were kind and dispassionate. One of them dug the bullets out of her car while the other took down her name, address, occupation, and asked whether she knew anyone who had a grudge against her.

"No," Natalie said. She was still sitting on the curb, hugging her knees. "No one." It was true.

The policeman glanced at Mary inquiringly. She shrugged. He looked back at Natalie. "You said you work at the university, Ms. Emerson." He consulted his clipboard. "Counseling students, is that right?"

She nodded. "Course advisor."

"College kids get upset about stuff. Maybe one of them is mad at you, maybe can't get a class they need to graduate, something like that?"

She thought about it, trying to concentrate over the sound of her pulse whooshing in her ears. She couldn't remember anything. "No," she said after a minute. "I don't think so. We've had a fairly peaceful semester. Besides, none of the students know where I live."

The cop tore off a page from his clipboard. "Okay. Here's your copy of the report — your insurance company will want to see it. If you get any more disturbances or have more information about the incident, call this number." He handed her a card with his name on it: Officer James Herrera.

He turned to go, but stopped when Mary asked, "You been getting a lotta drive-bys round here?"

"Yes — that is, no, ma'am," he said. "Not this area in particular. But summertime and all, once it's warmer, you get a lot more."

Mary seemed to consider that for a second. "Okay," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and left.

Natalie was holding the police report in one hand and the glass bits in the other. She sat on the curb until Mary helped her up and walked her toward the door of her duplex. The blond man, whose name was Bob, was taping plastic over her car window.

"Thank you," Natalie said to him as they passed.

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He looked up at her and smiled, but didn't answer.

"Thank you," she said again as Mary pushed open the door to Natalie's unit.

Mary hesitated. "You gonna call somebody? Your family? Got a sweetie?"

"I'm okay," Natalie said.

Mary said, "Somebody got to stay with you. Just till you sure it ain't some nutcase out after you. Or maybe you want to stay with your folks? Where they live?"

"They — no, they're dead. I could stay with my boyfriend."

"Fine," Mary said. "You call him. I'll check back to you in a little bit." She turned away from the open doorway.

It had gone dark while they waited for the police, and she hadn't left any of her lights on. Natalie eased past the china cabinet in the entryway, banged her thigh on the blanket chest that jutted into the hall, and groped for the light switch in the living room. Her knee thudded against the Victorian loveseat, and she heard an ominous creak from its arthritic arm as she found the switch.

The Tiffany lamp on the desk immediately behind her came on, its outlet controlled by the wall switch. The telephone table was to one side of the Duncan Phyfe sofa, so she picked her way across the Kismet rug, around the Queen's chair with its gold brocade. Stepping over the French wire basket filled with antique wooden bobbins wound with thick cotton thread, she reached the sofa and sat down on its plump striped cushions. The satin was cool and slick under her bare thighs.

The plain beige phone looked out of place against the ornate carvings of the table. Natalie picked up the receiver and dialed Paul's number, a familiar little digital song that brought things into focus for a second.

He answered after the third ring, just ahead of the answering machine. "Hello?" he said, sounding a little out of breath.

"Paul?" Her gaze traveled around the room, over the gilt-framed paintings and the Persian shawl that hung beside the upright piano. She couldn't seem to remember what she was supposed to say.

"Nat? Is that you? What's the matter, honey? You sound upset."

"I do?" She slid her feet out of her shoes and curled her toes up.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked, his voice sharper now.

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That's right, she thought. Something's wrong. "Can I come stay with you tonight?" she said.

"What's happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said. Mary squeezed through the entry hall, and Natalie waved to her. Mary looked around the living room, shaking her head.

Paul was speaking again. " — just got in. Start at the beginning and tell me what's happened. Have you been hurt?"

"No," Natalie said. "Just someone shot my car."

"Your *car*?"

Mary said, "He coming? How long till he gets here? I'll wait a little bit with you." She threaded her way through the maze and seated herself on the Queen's chair.

Natalie said to Mary, "It's okay, I'll spend the night over there."

"Who's gonna carry you there?" Mary said. "Your car ain't gonna drive right now. Bob says you gotta have a mechanic. One of them bullets went into the motor."

Paul said, "I heard that. I'll be right over."

"No," she said. "Not here — I mean, it's not necessary, Paul. I'll call a cab."

"Don't be silly," he said. "You live in Barton Hills, don't you? I can be there in fifteen minutes. What's the address?"

"I — you really don't need to come here," Natalie said. "I'm fine. Honest."

Mary reached over and plucked the receiver from her hand. "This her neighbor," she said. "She looking pale, you better come. Number 1606-B Bluebonnet." She listened a minute, then said, "Okay. I'll tell her."

She leaned over and hung the phone up. "That's a ugly table," she said. "Why you want to keep something like that? Get you something nice at Lack's." Then she pulled herself out of the Queen's chair and added, "Pretty chair, though. He'll be here in fifteen minutes. Sounds like a good man." She patted Natalie on the shoulder, then began tracing her way back toward the door.

"My place just across and down one, number 1603-C," she said. "Got to make supper for the kids now, but you call on me if you be needing anything." As she pulled the door to, Natalie heard her say, "God's love, she got a lotta stuff in there."

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Natalie considered not answering the doorbell when it rang twelve minutes later. Paul was the first man she'd dated in — how long? She couldn't really remember. But she knew it was too soon for him to see her living room. They'd only met a few months ago.

Rapid knocking followed the insistent ringing of the bell. "Natalie?" he called. "Are you okay?"

His voice cracked a little on the last word, and she realized he was panicked. She uncurled from the Duncan Phyfe sofa and slid her shoes back on. She didn't like to walk on the carpet barefoot.

As soon as she opened the door, Paul pushed inside and took her in his arms. He was trembling slightly. "I saw the car," he said. "If you'd been inside it — " He kissed her.

His mouth was warm, and Natalie felt some of the vagueness drop away from her. She drew back after a moment and said, "Thanks for coming."

He laughed and pushed at his pale brown hair, the color of a moth's wings. His little finger was crooked, curved like a claw even when the other fingers were flat. "I know you like your privacy," he said. "But this is scary. Did anyone see who did it?"

Natalie shook her head. "Just that it was someone in a big car. Nobody got the license number."

"Damn. You called the police?"

"Yes. They gave me a report for the insurance company."

"Yeah, we'll call first thing tomorrow to have the car towed in. One of the bullets went into the engine — you'll have to have it checked out."

"They'll be able to fix it, won't they?" she said, suddenly anxious. "I won't have to get a new car?"

"Well, if you do, your insurance company will pay for it," he said. "Hey, we going to stand in the hall all night? It's a tight squeeze." He tapped on the glass front of the china cabinet.

"But they'll probably fix it, instead, won't they?" she said.

"Yeah, sure," Paul said. "C'mon, let's sit down."

She hesitated for a second, then led him past the blanket chest, around the loveseat, and across the carpet to the sofa.

"God, you've got a lot of furniture," he said. "You know, I've never

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seen your place before?" The toe of one of his running shoes caught the wire basket and thread bobbins spilled everywhere. "Crap, I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Natalie said, her voice barely above a whisper. She knelt on the Kismet rug to stack the bobbins back in the basket. The bright colors of the thread soothed her. "I know it's crowded in here."

"Lots of antiques," he said, sitting gingerly on the sofa. "You never told me you were an antique-hunter."

"I'm not really," she said. "All these things belonged to my family."

"Oh," he said. "Hand-me-downs, huh?" He glanced around. "Pretty ritzy ones. All my folks ever gave me was a formica dinette set."

Natalie finished picking up the bobbins and sat on the sofa next to Paul. "Could we spend the night at your place?" she said. "It would only take a few minutes to pack, and I could ride to work with you in the morning."

"Already thought of that," he said. "You never stay with me two nights in a row, so I brought some things with me. We can just go from here in the morning. If you really want to go to work, that is. Maybe you should take a few days off."

"No," she said, panicked. "No, I have to go to work. I can't miss days, it — it upsets my routine."

He frowned. "It's not that big a deal, Natalie. I think you should just take things easy, but if you want to go, okay. I'll need to drop you off at the corner, though, and have you walk the rest of the way, so Dean Whittsen won't find out we're seeing each other."

"I — okay," she said. "But could we stay at your house?"

Paul smiled at her. It was one of the first things she'd liked about him, the way his brown eyes warmed up inside when he smiled. It made her feel as if she'd known him forever.

"Oh, no," he said. "I just got here, and already I know things about you I never knew before. You've been so secretive. Elusive. Now that I'm here, I want to stay awhile." He reached over and drew her onto his lap, one hand stroking her hip under her running shorts. "You know, I was starting to wonder if you were married?" he whispered, and kissed her throat.

They made love on the Duncan Phyfe, something Natalie found faintly scandalous. What would her mother say if the satin striped cushions got stained? Then she remembered her mother was dead. No explanations would be required.

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Afterward, Paul slid down and licked her midriff, just under her left breast. "Mmmm," he said. "Salty."

She stirred uneasily. "I just got back from running when the thing with the car happened."

She could feel him smile; his mouth tickled her ribs. "I like it," he said.

"They'll be able to fix my car, won't they?" she asked. "It was my brother's car, I wouldn't want anything to happen to it."

"I don't know, honey," he said, rolling to one side and picking up his jeans. "You've never said anything about having a brother before. Or about your family. Where do they live?"

"Um, they're dead."

He turned his head to look at her. "All of them?"

Natalie sat up, drawing her legs to her chest. "Uh-huh."

He was watching her. "You've never told me that, either, Nat. What happened? Where did they live?"

She grabbed her shirt off the floor and pulled it over her head. "I don't want to talk about it."

Paul waited until she had the shirt on, then reached over and took her hands. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. It's just important to me to know you. It's part of feeling close to someone, Natalie."

She said, "It's okay," and pulled away from him to put on her shorts.

"So tell me," he said, buttoning his jeans. "Where did you grow up?"

"I'm getting hungry all of a sudden, how about you? Let's go grab a sandwich or something. What are you in the mood for?"

His brows drew together. "I'm in the mood," he said distinctly, "for you to tell me what's going on with you."

"What do you mean?" Natalie said, tugging on her running shoes. She bent down and tightened the laces.

He caught her hands and drew her back. "I care about you, Natalie. I care so much, and we've only known each other a couple of months. I have to know things about you, what you looked like when you were seven and missing a front tooth, what color your first bike was, all kinds of stuff. Why won't you talk to me?"

He paused, clearly waiting for her to answer, but she turned her face away. Her body was stiff and flushed.

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He said, "I've told you all about my family, what it was like growing up with twin brothers who were three years older than me, what my folks are like." He held up his right hand, with the crooked little finger. "How I broke this playing baseball, all kinds of stuff. But I don't know where you lived when you were a kid, or what religion your family is. Hell, I don't even know why you'll never spend two nights in a row with me!" He cupped her chin and turned her face toward him. "I love you," he said. "Talk to me, okay?"

Listening to him, hearing the timbre of his voice and feeling the warmth of his hand against her face, Natalie had an eerie sensation of vertigo, as if she were perched at the top of a well and had just lost her balance. As if she were still poised, unmoving, at the beginning of an inevitable fall.

Heat flowed up her chest, her throat, her face, and she found that she was crying, large silent salty drops plopping from her chin to her T-shirt. Paul's intent face seemed to melt and blur in front of her.

"I don't know," Natalie said, over the whooshing of her pulse in her ears. "I can't tell you any of that stuff, because I don't remember."

THEY ENDED up eating take-out Chinese food at the huge claw-footed mahogany table that dominated Natalie's small dining room. During the meal, Paul asked questions.

"There's nothing wrong with me," Natalie said again as she picked up a shrimp roll with her chopsticks. They were pointed and elegant, black lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Where had they come from? "I remember some things. For instance," she closed her eyes and ran her fingers along the edge of the table, "I know that this table was my great-grandmother's. I can remember it sitting in her dining room, with the French doors on one side. And there was a built-in sideboard with a thick glass mirror over it, that deep blue-green glass with beveled edges."

"How old were you then?" Paul asked. He was rummaging through the stir-fry looking for more snow-peas.

Natalie was chewing her shrimp roll and didn't answer immediately. Then she said, "I'm not sure. But I have this clear picture of the table, set with a crocheted tablecloth. And I remember the way the wood floor

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shone with wax and light glinted on the mirror. And how silvery my great-grandmother's hair was. Her name was Amelia."

"And your brother?" Paul said. "What was his name?"

Natalie touched the glass fragments in the pocket of her shorts and concentrated, fearful of the new pictures she had seen when she touched the bullet holes earlier. But beyond the taste of torn metal and smoke, she found the only image she had of him: tanned arms rubbing a chamois across gleaming apple-red paint. "*Best engine Ford ever built.*" She was standing behind him, watching him work. She could hear his voice, see the way the hairs on his bare arm went gold in the sunlight. But she couldn't see his face. And she didn't know his name.

"I can't remember," she whispered. She picked up another shrimp roll and cleared her throat. "I remember him waxing the car, talking about it having a — a 286 engine. He said it was the best engine Ford ever built."

"That's a 289," Paul said. "Have you had any neurological tests?"

"I told you, the doctor said it's nothing to worry about."

"Your doctor doesn't sound like he has any concern at all about your mental health," Paul said. He found another snow-pea and stabbed it with his chopstick.

"It's not that big a deal," Natalie said. "I'm just a little foggy about my childhood. It's not that unusual."

"When did your parents die?" he said.

There was a line of tension around his voice that made her anxious. He was already losing patience with her and all her possessions. "About five years ago," she said. "Or was it six? Around that."

"How'd they die?" He sounded almost angry.

She shook her head. "I don't remember that. A car accident, I think. I think they were all together and something happened to them."

"You don't even remember them dying?" Paul set down his chopsticks and looked at her. "It's traumatic stress, Nat," he said. "You're blocking these memories because of trauma. Don't you want to know who you are?"

"I *do* know who I am," Natalie said. "I don't need a bunch of memories of my family to define me."

"No? Then why won't you spend more than one night away from home?" he said.

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She looked at the broccoli and chicken on her plate and didn't reply right away. After a moment, she said, "I need my routine. It helps me keep things straight."

"If it helps you so much, then why haven't you sold some of this junk off so you'll have some room in here?" he said. "Why, Natalie?"

The heat rose in her chest again. This time the tears were not so unexpected. She swallowed them back and said, "I — "

He waited.

"I — these things connect me to them," she said.

"To your family?"

She nodded, not understanding the source of his persistence nor of her own misery.

He hooked one leg around her chair and pulled it closer to his, catching her hand. When he spoke, his words were spaced, each one punching out of his mouth to make a point. "You are *obsessed* with your family. In spite of not even remembering them. It's time you let go. If your memories are so traumatic that you've completely *blocked* them — "

"There's nothing wrong with me," Natalie insisted.

He drew her into his lap and pulled the elastic band out of her hair, combing the curly mass with his fingers. "No," he said softly. "Nothing's wrong. You have me now. I'll be your family. I promise."

She leaned her head against his shoulder, enjoying the faint lime-scented tang of his aftershave and the feel of his muscles under her cheek.

"I've got a surprise for you," he said, his voice suddenly light.

"What's that?"

"Here." Leaning down, he fumbled with the zippered pocket on the outside of his overnight bag. He pulled out a brochure and handed it to her.

Natalie sat up and looked at it. It was for a cruise ship tour of the Mediterranean. "A cruise?"

"Well, we'd fly over, then board the ship. See? We'd cruise the Mediterranean and stop at classical sites. Three days Athens, and another two at Delphi. I thought — "

She turned toward him. "Classical sites?"

"You know," he said eagerly. "The Parthenon. Apollo's temple at Delphi. See — there's a list."

"But...a cruise?"

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He smiled at her, that warm smile that always delighted her. "I thought..." He paused. "A honeymoon?"

"Oh," she said. Unfamiliar territory. The sense of vertigo was back, stronger than before. All her routines were shifting. She looked at the picture on the brochure: tumbled stones, white in hot sunlight. Would she be able to remember her own name there?

"Don't you want to marry me?" he asked. "I know it's fast..."

"I just hadn't thought about it," she said. "Going away — it's not something I do."

He hugged her, stroking the nape of her neck. "I know. But you'll see, once you quit worrying, it'll be fine. Just the two of us, together, all the time. Everything'll be wonderful then."

That night they slept together in her Great-aunt Marjory's four-poster. Her memory of her aunt was one of the most tenuous she had: just that of a sweet-faced woman who looked a bit like Grandma, only younger, smoothing the sheets on this very bed. Natalie was glad that none of her other relatives would see her bringing Paul here; Aunt Marjory looked kind and easy-going. Marjory wouldn't mind that Paul was here, in her bed.

Natalie found the glass bits in her pocket as she was getting undressed. She put them on the nightstand, the blue-green of the shards blending with its chintz-ruffled cover. Then she set the alarm for thirty minutes earlier than usual, so she and Paul would have plenty of time in the bathroom the next morning. Already her ways of doing things were starting to blur, the familiar becoming strange.

Paul had a queen-sized bed at his place, and Aunt Marjory's bed was a double. Sleeping so close to him made her feel that their future was rushing toward her. It was as if the Earth had suddenly increased the speed of its rotation, so she now felt the forward motion of her life. Marriage...

Everything seemed disordered to her, as she lay there, listening to his breathing. Her brother's car — what would the garage people say about it? She couldn't imagine living without that one image of him, after she'd lost so much. Even his name. She closed her eyes and tried to summon the sound of his voice, the sun on his tanned arms, the mirror-bright finish of the freshly waxed car. But she could not, not without the feel of that finish

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beneath her fingertips. And Paul wanted her to take a trip to the other side of the world. Would she even remember them when she came back? A single night away tended to blur things. Could she remember that they mattered if she were gone for three weeks?

Once more she tried to summon her brother's voice, and failed. Maybe if she touched the car...

Natalie eased out of bed and went to the closet, stepping softly. Her T-shirt and running shorts were laid on top of the clothes hamper. Leaving the light off, she pulled them on and threaded her way through the living room to the sliding glass door. Opening it made less noise than the front door would.

There was a breeze, but the night air felt as if it were skin-temperature. Summertime tepid. She picked her way across the grass and through the gate. The Mustang looked the color of old blood in the faint light of the streetlamp. The dark bright finish made her think of the violent encounter she had recalled for the first time earlier. For an instant she wavered. But she couldn't remember her brother's face. Or even his *name.*

She walked to the curb and touched the burnished fender of his car. It was indistinct, but she caught the glimmer of shining paint, the soft rhythm of his voice, pulled it to her, concentrated —

"Natalie," Paul said sharply.

She flinched, and the faint image burst like a soap bubble.

"What are you doing out here? Are you *trying* to get hurt?" He curled his fingers around her upper arm and tugged her away from the car, but she balked.

"Just — " Her reaching fingers made contact with the car's skin, just as he gave another tug, harder this time. *One quick snapshot of a golden-haired man shoving someone against the fender, bones crunching —*

She snatched her fingers away like a burned child, hesitated a second more, then let Paul lead her up the walk and inside. He tucked her under the bedcovers without speaking and went back to lock the doors. Within minutes of his return, he was asleep again.

Her motion sickness was stronger than ever. She turned against the pillows, restless with listening to the sounds of Paul's breath and hearing only silence when she tried to invoke her brother's voice. Her hands clenched as she strained for the memory.

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Nothing. Then her fingers found the smooth dark wood of the bedpost. Marjory's face came to her, with its gentle expression; eventually she slept.

He was a tall man, tall and thin with long black hair, raggedly cut curls tangled around his bony face. His nose was long and sharp, but not as sharp as his gray eyes, which narrowed as he scrutinized her. He laughed, a harsh sound.

"Who are you," she asked him, and he laughed again.

He whirled in front of her, and she saw his black leggings and soft boots, with the toes scuffed, one heel missing; watched the loose sleeves of his chamois-colored shirt billow as he moved, watched the scarlet and purple and black ribbons tied at his elbows and wrists and knees dance sideways as his body turned.

He stopped, but even still, his body seemed to be in motion. Then he bowed, one hand over his heart in a display of mock courtesy. "Do you not remember me, Lady?" he said, and his accent was odd, the words clipped and short. He laughed again and said meaningfully, "I remember you."

The hand over his heart reached for her then. A large bony hand, with oversized, scarred knuckles and fingernails that were grimy and too long. That hand, reaching for her face, and Natalie suddenly knew that, if he touched her, he would take her mind.

She screamed.

THERE WERE hard fingers on her face, thumb and fingers embedding themselves in the flesh of her chin and cheek, and someone was shaking her. Natalie screamed again, the terror so enormous that it was unnameable; impervious to words or her own thoughts.

And then the fingers released her face and lightly slapped her cheek.

"Wake up!" It was Paul's voice, not the strange man's, Paul who was shaking her. "You had a bad dream, honey. Come on, wake up now!"

She choked and gasped, as if she were surfacing after too long under water. Opening her eyes helped: The soft familiar light of the painted china lamp beside Aunt Marjory's bed eased her out of the torrent of

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fear. Then she saw the glitter of the glass bits from the shattered car window.

Paul collapsed against the pillows. Sweat beaded his upper lip. "Christ, you scared me. Are you okay?"

"His hand — " Natalie gulped air and tried to calm herself. "There was a man, a stranger, but he knew me — he knew who I was, Paul! And he tried to touch my face." She curled up and pressed her face against her knees. "His hands — " Her voice broke.

Paul stroked her back lightly. "Shhh," he whispered. "It's okay, Nat, it was just a dream."

"He seemed real. Like a real person," she said. "Like someone I knew, but couldn't remember. The — " She hesitated. "There's a name for him. Not a person's name, but something I call him." She lifted her head.

He was rubbing a hand across his chest, dragging the pale brown hair one direction, then the other. "You were screaming something about 'the tinker.'"

The word seeped into her like cold water. "The Tinker," she repeated. "Oh, I do know him somehow, Paul! And he knows who I am — " She turned toward him, and he put his arms around her. "What if it's someone I don't remember, who hates me?" She shuddered. "He might be trying to kill me. Paul. He might be the one who shot my car."

She was clutching at his chest. Paul flinched and drew her hands away from his body, then said, "It was just a dream, Natalie. It'll be okay." But he looked troubled.

"You don't know that," Natalie said. "Don't you see? He could be out there with a gun — "

"Natalie," he said, and something in his face stopped her. "There's no stranger out there with a gun."

Her heart hammered a staccato cadence. "How do you know?"

He slid one hand up her arm to cup her cheek, and this time Natalie did not flinch. She was too frightened.

"Trust me, honey. I know a lot about you," Paul said.

Dread pressed against her throat. What did he know about her that she didn't know herself?

"Don't look at me like that!" he said, curling his fingers along her

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cheek. The nail of his crooked finger scraped lightly over her skin. "It's all going to be okay. As long as we're together, just the two of us, everything's going to be fine."

He drew her against his chest and stroked her hair.

She woke to daylight dimmed by drawn blinds and stillness. Paul had left a note on the nightstand that said he hoped she would rest, he would tell the dean she had called in sick, he would see her tonight.

Missing her morning routine bothered her; she set her alarm even on weekends so as not to disturb the rhythm of her day. So she got up, brushed her teeth and showered, put on her makeup and got dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. She was giving her hair its daily hundred strokes when the doorbell rang.

She had her hand on the knob, about to open the door when she hesitated. The silence of the complex outside was unnerving, here in the middle of a weekday. "Who's there?"

"Mary, your neighbor. Open up, would you? This thing's heavy."

Natalie turned the deadbolt and blinked at the brilliant sunlight outside. Her eyes watered from the contrast, and at first she couldn't make out what Mary was holding. Then her eyes adjusted, and she saw the bulky terra-cotta pot overflowing with a leggy silver-green plant.

Mary hustled inside and set the pot on top of the blanket chest in the hallway. She scooted the pot sideways a little. It left a muddy trail on the oak surface of the chest, and Natalie's hands twitched.

"Mmp. That's better." Mary turned to her, beaming. "This'll help. I can see you need pro-tec-tion." She rapped on the clay pot with one meaty knuckle, a faintly musical sound. "Rosemary," she added.

Natalie said, "Who's Rosemary?"

Mary looked at her for a moment, then she laughed. "The *plant* rosemary. Good for lotsa things, but best for keeping your house safe. You wear a little too, any time you go out." She twisted off a sprig and handed it to Natalie. "In your hair, maybe."

"Oh." The rosemary had a tangy sweet smell. She hadn't put her hair up yet, so she went to the bathroom to get an elastic band, and obediently tucked the rosemary sprig into her ponytail. She came out to find Mary ensconced on the Queen's chair.

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"Pretty chair," Mary said, stroking the gold brocade. "How come you got so much stuff?"

Natalie sat on the Duncan Phyfe sofa. "It helps me remember my family," she said.

"Oh, they die a long time ago, huh? That's hard, to lose your family. But you still got some people, somebody that took care of you, right?"

Natalie shook her head. "They're all dead. I was grown up when it happened though."

Mary's face lost its vivacity. "That's bad," she said. "Two of my brothers're dead. Every day I think about them and pray. That's how you do with your family too?"

Natalie picked up the basket of bobbins and began smoothing the colored threads with her finger. "I try," she told Mary. "But I only remember little bits about them. Paul says there's something wrong, me not being able to remember stuff."

Mary tilted her head to one side and regarded Natalie closely. "Could be," she said. "Seem to me like you need pro-tec-tion. That's why I bring you the rosemary. Do you all kinda good."

Natalie touched the striped satin on the arm of the sofa, running her fingers over the almost-invisible darn at the front edge. The image of her mother placing those small precise stitches was the only one that came to her. Her mother's memory was in the Queen's chair too. She reached over and touched the curved wooden arms, running her fingers lightly over the incised ball at the end. She could see her mother's face more clearly in this memory; she was looking up in this one, telling someone about the chair's history. But there was no more to the memory this time than there had ever been.

"I'm wearing the rosemary, but I don't remember any more than usual," she said.

Mary shrugged. "Maybe it'll help your remembering, maybe it'll do something else, can't tell. But you keep on wearing it, you hear?"

Natalie nodded and Mary heaved herself up from the chair. Natalie walked with her to the door and thanked her.

The brilliant sunlight outside ended abruptly at the front step, as if the house exerted a dimness that was too strong for daylight to overcome.

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Mary squinted, looking across the lawn, then glanced back and said, "Your car's gone."

"Car?" Natalie tried to think what she meant.

"Someone come and took it off this morning. Your boyfriend getting it fixed for you, maybe." Mary turned and walked off. "'Member what I say," she called back.

Natalie nodded. "I'm trying."

THAT NIGHT Paul came home after work with a family pack from the barbecue place near the office. "I thought you might not feel like cooking," he said. He seemed to be watching her more closely than usual.

"Thanks," she said. "That's thoughtful of you."

She got paper plates from the cabinet and glasses for iced tea.

He leaned against the doorway from the dining room, pulling off his tie. "The mechanic called. He sure fell in love with that damn car of yours."

"Hmm?" Natalie said. She filled the teakettle with water and put it on the stove.

"He was wild over what a classic it was. Sounded like he wanted to buy it, but I told him there was no way you'd sell. You being so attached to it you have to go out and tuck it in at night."

She got the tea bags from the pantry and took a pitcher from the cabinet.

"Right, Natalie?" Paul said.

"Hmm?" She glanced over.

He was watching her again. "You won't sell the car, because it belonged to your brother, isn't that right?"

Her throat tightened, and she frowned. "What are you talking about, Paul? I don't have a brother." The teakettle whistled and she poured hot water over the teabags. "This should be ready in just a sec. You want to set out the food?"

He watched her narrowly for a moment more, then tossed his tie over the arm of the Queen's chair and came to help. As they sat down to eat, he asked her, "You like living here, don't you?"

She put a spoon in the cole slaw. "What do you mean?"

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He glanced around the room. "Having to get by on just my salary doesn't bother you, now that we're married? It'll take a while for me to save up the money to take that trip we were talking about, you know."

Natalie had a spinning moment, dizzy with the image of the Tinker flashing into her mind. When had she and Paul gotten married? And why didn't she remember it? But he was watching her with that intent look on his face again. She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Of course it doesn't bother me. I love you, don't I?"

He lifted a hand as if to stroke her hair, but stopped abruptly. "What's that in your hair? It looks like a dead weed or something."

"It's rosemary," she said. "One of the neighbors brought it to me. Superstition I guess, but she says it'll keep me safe."

"You don't need that kind of foolishness. You've got me to take care of you."

She smiled at him. "I know that, Paul."

He seemed preoccupied and distant during the rest of the evening. Natalie was still wondering what else she had forgotten, who the Tinker was. She brushed Paul's remoteness aside.

She dreamed again that night, blurred dreams of walking through a large old house with all its furnishings swagged in dust covers. The floorboards creaked under her feet as she walked, and dust swam around her in ghostly clouds.

In her dream, she was desperately looking for something she needed, but she couldn't remember what it was. Frightened by the indistinct shapes of the furniture and the dim unfamiliar rooms, she continued to search, more and more urgently.

She went through room after room, searching, certain that if she saw the thing she would recognize it. Finding herself in a second-floor conservatory, it occurred to her that she had to lift up the dust cover of the large shape beside her and look underneath to find what she needed.

The idea was terrifying — the odd shape draped with cloth seemed menacing. But she heard the sound of voices from another room. People were coming; she would have to leave. Desperation overcame her fear and she lifted one corner of the cover.

In the gloom, she could not at first make out what was underneath.

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And then the shape moved, became recognizable: The Tinker lay under the cloth.

He opened his eyes, and she tried to drop the cover, but he caught her wrist and sat up.

"I remember you," he said in that mocking way, and reached for her face with his other hand. "Do you remember me?"

She woke from the nightmare in a cold sweat. Paul had the lights on and was kneeling next to the bed. He had flipped the ruffled cloth back from the nightstand, and was examining the piece of furniture underneath. She must have made some sound, because he turned his head and looked at her.

"This is an old radio," he said. "One of the floor models, a tube set."

She swallowed twice before she could get her voice started. "I know. Leave it alone, please. I had a nightmare."

He glanced at her, frowning, then looked back at the radio. "Does it work? These are valuable nowadays."

She cried, "Don't!" as he reached for the switch, but it was too late. The radio made a scratchy burp, and then it was there, the sound of a woman, weeping desolately. "No," Natalie said, "turn it off!"

Paul looked at her, confused. "What is this? Tube radios have to warm up — "

The desperate crying ripped at her; she nearly screamed herself. "Turn it off, turn it off, turn it — "

He twisted the tuning knob. The sound didn't alter, except that the sobbing rose in intensity. "Kinky," he said.

Natalie had dragged the pillows up to her chest, crushing them close. " — off," she said, the voice keening in her ears. "Don't make me touch it, please, Paul, turn it off."

"Sure," he said. He touched the controls again, and the sound stopped. He was still staring at the set. "What's with this thing, anyway?"

"Cover it up," Natalie said. "I don't like to look at it."

He glanced over at her. "Right," he said. He got back in bed and cuddled her close to him. "Sorry you had a bad dream," he whispered as he turned out the light.

* * *

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Paul kissed her goodbye as he was leaving the next morning; she came half-awake and listened to the sound of the bedroom door closing behind him. It was considerate of him to let her sleep in, but she would have liked to fix him breakfast. Something a good wife should do. Besides, she had to get up early; it was a compulsion she didn't understand, but couldn't shake.

She got up right away and dressed quickly, planning to go across to look for Mary. As she was dressing, she found some pieces of broken glass on the nightstand. Looking at them made her uneasy, so she threw them away.

The doorbell rang as she was tying her shoes.

It was her neighbor, the blond man. She couldn't remember his name. "Oh, hi," she said.

He looked upset. "Are you okay? I saw that car pulling away again, and I thought — "

"What car?" Natalie was trying to remember his name, and hadn't he done her a favor of some kind? What was it he'd done?

"I was sure it was the same car, you think you can't remember things, but then when you see them again, you recognize all the little things — it's a dark blue Ford, kind of muddy, and I couldn't read the license — "

"Oh," Natalie said. "That's just Paul's car. My boyfriend. No — I mean my husband."

The neighbor went white. "Your husband? God, I'm sorry, I didn't know. I didn't even think you were married. Look, are you sure you're okay? He — " The man hesitated, then plunged on, "he didn't hurt you or anything, did he?"

"No," Natalie said, confused. "He spent the — he *lives* here." She took a deep breath to steady herself, and said what she was certain of. "He just got up and kissed me goodbye."

The man was watching her a little strangely now. "You just got back together? Aren't you going to call the police?"

"About what?" she said, starting to get upset herself. "Because you saw my husband's car outside?"

He was shaking his head. "Because it's the same car I saw pulling off after your Mustang got shot up."

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"What are you talking about?" Natalie said. There was a rushing sound in her ears, and she was feeling dizzy.

It took her a few seconds to realize that the neighbor was backing away, still shaking his head. "Never mind," he said. "I'm sorry I tried to get involved. Just forget it."

She stood there in the doorway for a few moments after he left, trying to get her thoughts straight. *Should* she call the police? *What was she forgetting?* Her Mustang, he had said. Shots. Who could explain that to her?

Then she brushed against the rosemary plant and remembered Mary. She pulled a sprig off the plant and put it in her hair, then drew the door shut behind her with shaking hands. Mary lived just across the street and down one, she could remember her saying that.

She went down the sidewalk, stepped around some broken glass lying by the curb, and crossed the street. The complex was swathed in early morning stillness, the air starting to warm up as the sun worked its way above the trees. She walked up the sidewalk of the unit opposite hers and looked at all the numbers, trying to remember which was the right one. Then she heard rapid footsteps on the sidewalk behind her and turned around.

It was Paul, his moth-pale hair flat and shiny in the sunlight. "Why aren't you at home?" he said.

"I — "

"I forgot something and came back for it," he said. "And when I went inside and you were gone..." He came to her, enveloping her in his arms. "Come back inside."

She went with him, oddly unsettled by his touch. Pausing in the entryway, she broke off a stem from the rosemary plant and twined it in her fingers.

"I'm worried about you, Nat," he said from the living room. "You're acting strange. Maybe we should take you to the doctor." He reached for her again, his crooked finger curved like a hook.

She backed up a step and knocked over the wire basket. The wooden bobbins went everywhere, a flash of brilliant color, some of the threads unwinding. Natalie knelt and gathered them up, then sat on the sofa with the bobbins in her lap.

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Paul sat down beside her. "Why are you so nervous? I'm here, I'll stay home today and take care of you." He paused. "If you want me. You do, don't you?"

Quickly she said, "That's okay. Really. I don't even know what it is I want." She looked down and busied herself with untangling the threads. The thick cotton was cool and smooth under her fingers. "I can't remember what I wanted," she said. "In my dream. I knew I was looking for something, that I had to have it back, but I didn't know what it was. But I knew I'd recognize it if I found it.'

"You want to remember?" His voice was soft, still. Dangerous? But why should she think that? He wasn't even touching her.

Natalie found herself twisting threads together with the rosemary, knotting and braiding them in a random pattern. "I — yes, I guess that's it. I want to remember everything. It seems like I keep dropping things as I go along, losing them, and then I can't find them ever again. I want to find the things I've lost."

"You dreamed there was something you'd lost? That was all it was — your nightmare?" He slid his hand across the stripes of the sofa cushion. His short neat fingernails made a faint ripping noise on the slick fabric.

"Well." Natalie wove the threads through her fingers into a pattern of scarlet, purple, and black. "I was looking for something in a house, this big old house that seemed familiar. But I didn't know where I was really, and all the furniture was covered. But I knew I had to find something, so I lifted up one of the dust covers and — "

"Hidden memories," he said. "Secrets. And they frighten you, don't they, Natalie?"

Her throat closed over any words she might have had.

"Well," he said. "I should get back. Since you don't want me. Walk me out, at least."

Natalie's fingers clenched on the threads she held, snapping them free of the bobbins. His hand was on her wrist, tugging at her, so she set the basket aside and stood. The braid of threads wound through her fingers; she closed them around it and followed Paul.

Despite her unease, he went quickly, without even a kiss. Natalie watched the dark blue sedan pull away and turn the corner, then went back to her door.

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Cloudshadow skimmed across the front lawn and was gone. The wind was picking up. Uncertain, she stood on the porch for a moment. Why had she never noticed before how much pecan trees *moved*? The ones in the yard were pitching like boats, their striating shadow-patterns flashing over her so fast she felt seasick.

Hadn't she, as a child, lain ill in some narrow sultry room and endured such a thing? Flashes of refracted light rocking around her like water-dance on the walls, ceiling, floor, intensifying her nausea to the point where she felt she would die?

She reached for the veranda post, needing its support, but it wasn't there. No veranda, no azalea-masked railings, no smooth gray-painted boards underfoot. No flat smooth steps with cast-iron boot-scrapers embedded in their edges. The duplex had only an abbreviated overhang and three feet of cement to mark its entrance.

She looked toward the street, for an instant seeing large old oaks arched out over it, dripping shade, dark and cool, on the sun-hot pavement.

The image shimmered and was gone.There were only boxwoods by the street, green and square. From one, braided threads waved in the breeze, like a tiny bright flag, right in front of Natalie's unit. She looked down at her hand. Empty. When had she tied the braid to the bush? And why didn't she remember doing it?

The phone rang inside, its shrillness muffled but compelling. She answered on the third ring. A man whose voice she didn't recognize said, "Miss Emerson?"

"Yes?" she said.

"This is Officer Herrera of the police department," the man said. "I responded to a shooting incident a few days ago?"

Natalie gripped the phone and said, "Yes?" A shooting incident? Her neighbor had said something about shots, cars —

That whooshing sound was back in her ears, making it hard for her to hear the officer's voice.

" — tentative ballistic match," he was saying. "Don't want to alarm you, but it's possible it was the same weapon used in a mass killing a few years back. Did you ever know a family called Ericson?"

Her lungs hauled in air, and she listened to the beating of her heart. "I don't think so," she said. "That is, I don't remember anyone by that name."

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She heard him sigh. "I didn't think you would, and there's probably no connection. It might not even be the same gun, or it might have been stolen or sold. But the entire Ericson family was killed, and the case was never solved. So if you remember anything, you will call us immediately?"

"Yes, of course," she said. He thanked her and hung up before she could explain how unlikely it was that she would remember. Shots. A car, a — a Mustang? Had Paul said something about a car last night?

She had to do something.

But what?

Natalie found herself searching through the house, almost as she had in her dream the night before, moving from one piece of furniture to the next, touching each one. The sofa's image of her mother seemed blurred and faded, like a scratchy old photograph, just a foggy image of a dark-haired woman bent over her needlework. The piano's keys did not give her any images at all, now, nor did the Queen's chair.

She strained for recall, trying to touch the pieces with her mind as well as her flesh. Sweat came on her chest, along her spine, as she reached, grasping for the elusive memories. She knew they were in there, *knew* it, if she could only stretch a little further —

It did no good.

The dining table — it had always held a vivid picture for her — she went to it, letting her fingers follow the curved edge, explore the ornate carving of the clawed feet. And the usual image was there: the table standing on a polished wood floor, set with a crocheted tablecloth. There was something else to the memory, Natalie could feel it, fuzzy, at the edges of her perception, but could *not* drag it out into the center of her mind.

She sat there under the table, one hand stroking its mahogany claw, until she fell asleep.

Waking was a groggy thing for her this time, a gradual process of adding referents until she knew where she was. A fringe hung down in front of her, and she touched it, only moments later recognizing the Persian shawl that usually hung beside the piano.

"Boo," said a deep, familiar voice in her ear.

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She jerked upright and rammed her head against the underside of the table. The force of the blow made her eyes water and her head spin, but she scrambled out from underneath anyway, dragging the shawl away with her.

The Tinker lay on one side, head propped in his hand, immediately behind where she had been. Seeing him there, knowing how close she had been to him made her stomach lurch.

"Who — "

"Don't remember me, do you?" he said, and his voice was as she had dreamed it, nasal and clipped. He smiled at her, revealing teeth as large and yellowed as a horse's, and added, "I remember you."

"You — you're the Tinker," she said. Each breath was hard to capture, as if the air in the room were eluding her lungs.

He rolled out from under the table and vaulted to his feet, his movements as controlled and effortless as an acrobat's. He was a head and a half taller than she, and she could smell him, a strange dark smell like loam and rotting leaves. "Ah, so you do remember something, then. But you've got my name wrong, I'm afraid."

"Not — Tinker?" Her breath was shorter than ever; he was close enough to touch her. She made two slow steps back, never taking her eyes from him.

His taunting grin flickered, and he bowed the extravagant gesture she remembered from her dream, one hand sweeping wide and then covering his heart. "The *Tinkerer*," he said.

"What do you want?"

His brows shot up. "What do *you* want, Natalie?" He unfolded the large grimy fingers of his hand and dangled the braided twist of threads she had made in front of her. "You sent for me."

"No!" she said. "That's — if it's a signal, it was an accident. I don't want you here."

"No?" he said, his brows raised again. "But you said, 'I want to remember everything. It seems like I keep dropping things as I go along, losing them, and then I can't ever find them again. I want to find the things I've lost.'" He repeated her every inflection, the very rhythm of her voice.

"How do you know what I said?" she asked. "Why are you here?"

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He wound the braided threads around one finger; they disappeared, and he was holding a rosemary sprig instead. "Because you said you wanted to find the things you've lost." He whirled, and she jumped back, knocking against the butler's table.

But he only reached back under the dining table, behind the clawed feet, and drew out a battered wooden chest about the size of an orange crate. He twisted a carved knob on the front and opened the top, releasing a flutter of sparkling dust motes that drifted lazily to the ceiling and lighted there.

The Tinkerer thrust his arms into the chest, and she heard odd sounds, like scraps of music or talk, quickly cut off. The muscles of his back flexed, she could see them through the chamois shirt, and the ribbons tied at his elbows rippled scarlet and purple as his arms worked.

"Ah," he said after a few minutes, sitting back on his heels. "I knew I had it here somewhere." He bounced to his feet and turned toward her, holding a miniature dollhouse perhaps a foot and a half tall.

The details of the Victorian house were perfect: tiny weathered cedar shakes on the roof and sides, porch steps that sagged slightly in the center, the veranda floor painted gray and the railings white. Even the delicate multi-paned windows were glassed.

"Here we are, then," he said, setting the house down.

Captivated, she knelt beside it, peering in the windows. A flash of memory — *chandeliers in high-ceilinged rooms, dim and cool against the onslaught of summer afternoons, floor fans humming like large benign insects, the pulse-splat of sprinklers and scent of water drifting through open windows.* "There were oak trees here," she whispered, touching the imaginary lawn. "And azaleas here, around the veranda."

"Where d'you want to start? How about with that table you've knocked about?"

"The table?" Natalie dragged her gaze away from the house and looked at the butler's table next to her. The removable tray-top was askew.

The Tinkerer made an irritated sound. "You want to remember everything. You *have* decided, haven't you? Let's get on with it then."

Natalie hesitated. He frightened her. But the images of her dream came back to her: the desperate search through half-familiar rooms, in a house that looked much like the model resting on her carpet. With the

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memory came the sharp fresh longing to find the precious thing she had lost, lost beyond any ability to recall.

She had to do whatever it took to remember.

"What do I do?" she asked him.

"Sit there," he replied, "and put your hand on the table. Right. Now just close your eyes, that's good, and, here, let me guide your other hand — "

She flinched when she felt his callused fingertips on her wrist, but he tightened his grasp and drew her hand to the miniature shingles on the dollhouse.

In the background of her mind, she had been aware of the memory connected with the butler's table: a doll's tea party, tiny white porcelain saucers and cups, really no more than a snapshot of a tow-headed boy of about seven balancing one saucer on a finger and laughing. As the Tinkerer placed her hand on the house, though, the image intensified, clarified, colors draining into it the way water fills an empty bag, and she saw the boy move, spinning the saucer, the saucer beginning to drop —

The image was gone. She could feel it, somewhere inside her head, but it was whirling too fast for her to touch it. Natalie opened her eyes.

The Tinkerer was smiling at her, his horsey teeth showing. "There now, that wasn't so bad, was it?" He picked up a miniature butler's table, perfectly crafted, and set it inside the house.

The real butler's table was gone. "How will I remember, if you take that?" she said. "I have to touch things to remember."

"Not anymore," he said. "The memory is there. It's probably still circling around, looking for a place to land, but it'll settle down in a day or so."

"But you're taking the table," she said. "How will I know if you're lying to me? I'll forget all about it."

He laughed. "Brains all scrambled, are they? Happens when you mess about with your memories too often. Well. Here." He reached into the box behind him and brought out a handful of marbles. He cupped them next to his chest and examined them, finally choosing one and tossing the others back in the box. Then, balancing the marble on his finger, he gave it a twirl, setting it spinning. She watched it — it was a swirlie with blue and red ribbons inside — and his hand reached for her face.

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"Don't touch me!" she said, jerking back.

"Don't fret. I'm just going to settle the memory," he said. "Watch the marble." He touched her cheek with his forefinger, his thumb curving around her chin.

Natalie watched the marble, instantly mesmerized by the spiraling colors, spinning, slowly spinning inside, around and around...

...and she was watching her brother Tom, the image faintly scratchy, like a piece of old film, but it was *Tom*, spinning a saucer from her doll's tea-set on his fingertip, his white-blonde hair, so like their father's, gleaming in the sun that slanted through the blinds of her mother's parlor....

Tom. Her brother's name was Tom.

The Tinkerer pulled his hand away and snapped his fingers in front of her nose. "See?" he said, flipping the marble over his shoulder. She heard it land inside the wooden box and roll. "They'll all settle out like that in a few days. What next? How about that chair?"

It was the Queen's chair, which surrendered layered recollections of her mother, telling stories of her girlhood, sitting in the chair and reading to Natalie and Tom...and then it was the big mahogany table, a snarled tangle of Thanksgivings and Christmases, games of canasta and checkers, shaded afternoons spent sipping minted tea and glittering evenings with candlelight gleaming on cut crystal and polished silver.

The sofa, the ugly telephone stand, the Victorian loveseat, the Persian shawl — a wealth of remembrance stored in each one, faces, names, her father's laugh, her brother's chipped front tooth, her grandmother's passion for silk dresses, were all there, safe under the smooth polished surfaces of the wood and fabric, horsehair and batting.

It was wealth, wonder, more solid joy than she could ever remember feeling. The memories filled her up, made her substantial and connected her to the ground. She felt real.

The straight chair — the desk — the Tiffany lamp, she relinquished them all, happily. They were only things, and things could be lost or broken. But the memories they carried would last. She could keep them always.

The apartment had grown dim as she transferred the pieces, exchanging them for the gratifying weight of remembrance, what next, what next?

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"The dishes?" she asked him. "Are there memories there? I want to remember more."

"I deal only in furnishings," he said, glancing about. "You'll remember more soon, you know. Perhaps too much. Although I cannot give you back memories you've lost track of," he said. "Only the ones you've kept around you, the ones you still have some connection with."

"Losing track of things, yes. I've done that, I know. Oh, but the piano!" Natalie said. "I'm forgetting the piano."

He paused. "There is the matter of my fee," he said.

"Your — fee?" she faltered.

He gave her a wicked wink. "The piano," he said.

"I see," she said. "You'll just take it? Not give me its memories?"

He nodded.

She went to the piano, stroked the rosewood cover and lifted it, fingered the keys. What memories were locked inside here? Small hands struggling to reach an octave, guided by larger hands, veined and wrinkled, but very gentle? What was inside that she would never see?

She turned away. "That's all right," she told him. "It's worth it." She swept her arms around the room, empty except for the wire basket of bobbins on the rug, lit only by the dim bulb of a modern floor lamp. "I remember so much! I'm someone else, now!"

She hadn't been watching closely; he had a tiny piano in his hand. He admired it for a moment, then tucked it into the house. "Just a few more items, and I'll be done here."

She glanced around. "Nothing's left."

"The carpet," he said. He pulled a scrap of yellow paper from his sleeve and read, "A mahogany buffet, a cedar chest. A pie safe. A '67 Mustang. A tube radio." He smiled his horsey smile. "I keep an inventory."

"The radio? Carpet?" she said. "I don't like them, they make me feel — they give me bad feelings. I don't want to swap them. And I don't even remember those other things. I don't have them anymore." Her hands were cold and quivery; she rubbed them together.

He shrugged. "Well then. Nothing to be done about those, lost and gone forever, oh my darling. But the carpet and the radio are here; let's finish up. I've got to be going."

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"Just take them," she said. "I don't want the memories, I don't like how they feel."

"Part of the bargain," he said. "It's all or nothing. That's the rule."

She bit her lip, denting it hard with her teeth. She always avoided even thinking about the radio, her mind veered off and she had to wrestle it back. Considering it, its dark face, the crackle of the tubes heating, the awful desolate sound in her head when she touched it —

"Make up your mind," the Tinkerer said. "I've business to conduct elsewhere."

"If I say no?" she said.

He shrugged. "I can put all this stuff back." His yellowed teeth showed. "I'll have that dining table for my fee this time, I think. You know, though, much more of this scrambling things about and your rememberer won't work at all."

Okay, she thought. All or nothing, and I can't live with nothing. Not anymore. "Rules of the game," she said aloud. She thrust one hand at him and thrust the other into the thick wool pile of the rug. "Do it then."

But he took her wrist, slowly, as if suddenly reluctant. Perhaps he'd grown tired. There was a crackling feeling under her fingers, as if of static, the breathless tingling instant before the spark strikes —

And then the memories were thick and red around her, sounds and images she could not decipher at first: frenzied movement, people around her running, falling, cracks like thunder, a familiar voice screaming, screaming — her *mother's* voice — and she clawed at him, trying to reach her mother and was frozen by the shocking pain of a blow to the head — and a hand was cupping her cheek, its little finger curved and clawlike against her skin, a voice that whispered to her about *just the two of them now, so much better, just the two* — until her vision blurred and the sounds dimmed, until all she knew was the coppery taste in her mouth and the sticky heat that soaked the rug beneath her reaching hand....

As the memory expelled her, her head whirled, aching at the crown as if she'd been struck. "What was that?" she cried out, "What happened? I couldn't see — can't remember enough — " She tried to pull herself back into the memory, to understand, but it was like trying to touch a spinning knife-blade; razor-sharp colors and sounds sliced at her, and she could not grasp them.

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She reached for him, though he flinched away, but she caught his shirt, ignoring the smear of bloody fingerprints she left there. "Fix it! I have to remember *now*, you have to help," she said.

The Tinkerer jerked away from her, his mobile lips drawn back from his teeth in a half-snarl. "Not my job," he said. "Let's get the other over with." He grabbed her arm and tugged her into the bedroom.

She wrenched loose, but followed him, the spark of razored colors blurring her vision, making her head ache. The bedroom was stuffy and dim. "The bed's not on your list?" she said. "It has memories in it."

He glanced at the four-poster. "Not my work," he said. "It's just a piece of furniture. This, now," he flipped the ruffled cloth off the radio, knocking the lamp and table clock onto the carpeting with a thud. "This is packed with them."

Natalie froze, engulfed in dread, unable to speak.

The Tinkerer grasped her hand, and darkness closed around her —

— pain like frozen night stabbing her lungs and throat so she could scarcely bear to breathe, the sound of desperate sobs in her ears. The rasp of painful breathing was loud, her own, sounding both in her ears and inside her head. Blackness. Despair. Guilt. It went on and on, an unending cycle of misery, the darkness and the sobbing, until her chest and eyes burned with agony. And then, slowly, the memory settled, and she remembered. A clear image, this one, a recent vintage, not clouded or fuzzy. She remembered herself, pulling the Tinkerer's hand to her face, saying, "Take them away. I can't stand to remember it anymore. Please, I'm begging you, take them all."

Slowly, painfully, an exhausted swimmer reaching shore, she dragged herself free of the cycling loop of memory. Sunlight streamed through the mini-blinds at a steep angle. She lay on the fourposter, her cheek resting in spreading dampness on the quilted spread, the faint tick of a clock like a counterpoint to her breathing, the sound of it in the apartment's stillness a declaration that she was alone.

Sitting up, she saw the clock on the floor where the Tinkerer had spilled it. Four o'clock. Paul would be back soon. It took her several minutes to find a notepad, but there was one in a kitchen drawer. She made her list carefully, instructions to herself. She knew now, and

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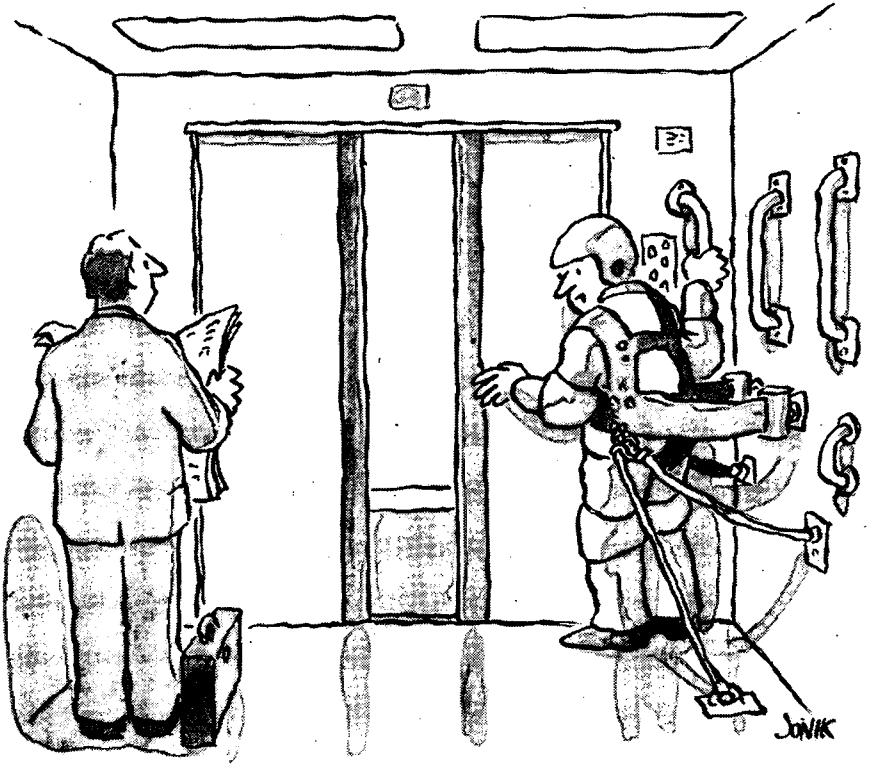
would not let herself forget again. No more. Next time, she would know what to do.

Already memories pulled at her, dark and red, remembrance of the living and the dead. Natalie wiped her palms against her jeans and went to the phone. Her eyes blurred with unshed tears, but her hands were steady as she dialed the police station and asked for Officer Herrera.



"This your first time on a bungee elevator?"

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"Jinx" marks Leo Kenden's first appearance in F&SF. *Kenden has held a number of jobs in the software business, has written in other fields, and lives in the Southwest.*

This is his first science fiction story.

Jinx

By Leo Kenden

YOU DON'T TAKE YOUR eyes off Oliver for a minute — for one second, if he's with another child. Or you will be explaining to Kerry and Ron or Jan and Tim how you let little Max or pretty Alexandra get that nasty bruise, or that unfortunate scratch.

Right now they're doing okay, Oliver and Brett. They are the same age, within a month or so, though Oliver is half a head taller and ten pounds heavier. Brett is in second grade; Oliver, of course, is in a special school. They are playing with Oliver's Game Boy, a gift from his grandmother, who never manages to get the right size clothes, either. Actually, Brett is playing with the Game Boy. "Watch this, Oliver," he says.

Oliver has picked up a piece of fiber optic cable somewhere and has it hanging out of his mouth. He grunts. "Coke coke coke."

"Mr. Huth, I think he wants something to drink," Brett says politely.

"Come on, Oliver. Coke coke coke," you say. "How about you, Brett?"

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"No, thanks." Concentrating on the Game Boy.

You take a step toward the kitchen. It's Saturday. Laurie is at the doctor. You're thinking about what your life would be like if you put Oliver in an institution...if Laurie could get pregnant again, and you had a normal child. Then you hate yourself for thinking that, and while you're hating yourself, Oliver turns around and goes up to Brett and yanks the Game Boy out of his hands.

You hear this and turn just in time to see Oliver clubbing Brett with it.

Brett has played with Oliver for most of his life. He knows when something awful is about to happen — he's grown up in southern California and has been doing the earthquake dodge and roll since he could walk. He gets an arm in front of the Game Boy, then slams Oliver right against the wall of the garage.

Because you feel responsible, you go to Brett rather than your son. "Sorry," you say, since Oliver can't apologize. Brett has a gash on his arm and it hurts. The kid is trying to hold back tears.

Oliver is on his feet again, looking for that goddamn hunk of cable to chew on. He wanders off to sit in the flowers. Nothing seems to mark him. If he didn't rub the back of his head, you'd swear he was a character in a Roadrunner cartoon.

You hold Brett under the medical scanner long enough to hear that you should give him some disinfectant and a Band-aid. Before long he goes back to the Game Boy. A little while later his mother Sarah comes to get him. You play back the tape from the backyard camera and give her a hard copy of the medical stuff. She commiserates and says she understands, but you know it will be just that much harder to get anyone over to play with Oliver again.

And you won't be able to blame them. Because on Sunday Oliver will have taken a shit on the Persian rug in the living room then decided to stay up all that night screaming. And you won't want to play with Oliver again. You won't even want to see him.

There are many good things about the Naughts — speaking, of course, of the decade that officially began January 1st, 2001. The ozone layer is recovering. Fewer people are going to bed hungry. Most nukes are out of

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their silos. There is an all-Brady Bunch Channel. Your house is smarter than you are.

In January 2001, Oliver Huth was nineteen months old. Right about that time you and Laurie made friends with the Shaners, who had a boy named Brett almost exactly that age. You noticed right away that Brett was talking and Oliver was not. That Brett was paying attention to things and Oliver was not. That Brett would play and Oliver would...drift. At first you thought Brett was pretty goddamn smart, probably some kind of genius, then you did some surfing on the Home Pediatric Channel and decided maybe Oliver wasn't quite developing properly.

You wondered how to raise this with Laurie. When it came to Oliver, she was living on a river in Egypt; you were spending time on De Nile yourself. Eventually it was plain for everyone to see that Oliver, your big, strong, healthy, handsome baby boy, was a low-functioning autistic. (Or something like that: every time a new genome map gets released the labels change.) Oliver was never going to be a bundle of love snuggling into a warm bed in the morning. He was never going to sing the ABCs with his front tooth missing. He wasn't going to play baseball, though he might beat the shit out of you with a bat if he felt like it. He didn't even stay handsome

Year One, Year Two, Year Three of the Naughts. You staggered forward, finding more reasons to travel at work. For three years you and Laurie were almost too scared to even fuck. What if you rolled snake eyes again?

But lately things have settled into a rhythym that can either be a routine or a rut, depending on the weather and Oliver's mood. Laurie sells things from the house, part-time. You work for the state. For several glorious hours, five days a week, Oliver is someone else's responsibility.

That Saturday afternoon, an hour after the latest incident, Oliver is zoned out in front of the TV watching *Rain Man* when Laurie comes home, dropping some brochures on the dining room table. She looks bad — a face you have seen often enough — and you know you have to ask. "Our maps came in," she says. "Doctor Reyes is advising us not to have any more children."

"Advising. Not telling. What are they going to do, Laurie? Put us in genetic jail?

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You feel defiant on general principles — you also, in fact, don't like this particular doctor, Reyes — but you recall your mother's history of depression, and your sister's son, who is only slightly better off than Oliver — and know that Reyes has a case.

Laurie sits down on the couch next to Oliver, stroking his head. "Don't put him to sleep," you say, but it's already too late. Asleep he could pass for normal. You can dream a little.

"Did you look at the brochure?" Laurie says, nodding toward some papers on the table. You pick them up. Several flyers about adoption. And one from something called Landis Industries. "For the Special Child." Landis wants to sell you an autonomous therapeutic companion substitute. It's a dinosaur doll of some kind named Jinx. "What is this? Some kind of robot playmate?"

"It sounded interesting for Oliver."

"It also sounds expensive."

"It's still experimental. Doctor Reyes knows about it because he was their consultant."

"So we could get this thing for free?"

"All we have to do is waive liability and allow them to make records."

"There goes the old privacy."

"What privacy is that, Neil?" She puts a blanket over Oliver, then walks past you toward the kitchen. "Besides, they're coming out Monday."

MONDAY YOU roll out of bed with two whole hours of sleep. The house, having monitored the noise level throughout the evening, apologizes for waking you, but that's its job. Laurie deals with Oliver, who somehow must be made ready for school, while you get showered and dressed.

You are backing out of the driveway with Oliver when you see the Landis van pull up. It's an ordinary van; might as well belong to the phone company, except for the holo of Jinx on the side. Its goofy little eyes move toward Oliver and the damn thing says, "Hi there!"

Oliver goes wild for it. "Truck truck truck!" he sings. "Hi hi hi!" And tries to unbuckle his seatbelt.

"You'll see him later," you say, pointlessly, knowing Oliver's already going to be late for school.

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When you've gotten Oliver safely inside the classroom, a process which is never routine, you notice posters of Jinx here and there around the school. You figure Jinx is just one of those kids' TV characters you've so far managed to avoid.

As you buckle back into your car, you see the kids from the normal part of the school, pushing and shoving the way you remember doing. You refuse to believe that your life is passing without this. You know the feeling is irrational...that many people pass through life sitting in wheelchairs, for God's sake, or selling french fries, or in general being lots unhappier than you for much better reasons. Still. You want a child. A normal one.

"All they did was bundle a whole new program with the house stuff, and give us this little guy." Laurie is holding a notebook and nodding toward Jinx, who stands there in the middle of the room, maybe three feet tall, wearing nothing but orange fuzz. "Fur," Laurie corrects you, since you don't realize you're speaking.

The deal is, Laurie picks up Oliver at two-thirty, which makes sense considering that you don't get home till six. (And at least once a week you've got a perfectly good excuse to be even later.) So you figure Jinx will be fully operational out in the yard, or returned for reprogramming by the time you get home. But no, Laurie has waited and you must participate. Jinx stands in the living room.

You try to pick him up, nearly aggravating your hernia. "I wouldn't do that, Neil. He weighs almost two hundred pounds," Laurie says.

"I'm glad somebody was paying attention during the briefing. What does it run on?"

"A power pack that we have to recharge every other night."

"Does he take care of that himself? Or do we have to plug him in?"

"We do." She is getting exasperated. Oliver has been left alone in the hallway for maybe four whole minutes, a new record. You can hear him breathing. "I guess we should introduce them," you say.

With a last glance at her notebook, Laurie opens the door. Oliver is standing there completely naked and baffled. You can see the confusion vanish from his eyes when he sees Jinx. "Hi," the orange thing says. It has a cute little voice; it almost sings. Oliver is too pleased to speak.

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He comes right up to Jinx and starts to poke at him.

You turn to Laurie. "It talks?"

"Not really. It's got a vocabulary of a hundred words. They say it's supposed to match that of the child-companion." You wouldn't have bet that Oliver knew a hundred words. Maybe three he could repeat thirty-three and a third times.

"Backyard," Oliver is saying.

"Get dressed first," you start to say...but Jinx beats you to it. "Clothes," it says, and rolls off toward Oliver's bedroom. Oliver obediently follows.

You and Laurie are a step behind. You watch in stupefied amazement as Oliver picks up his clothes, which have been wadded on the floor, and puts them on. "He's never dressed himself before," you say to Laurie.

"Well, not in his own clothes," she says, which makes you wonder for a moment. "He's been pretty goddamn good at getting them off, though."

Oliver has his shirt on backwards, but Jinx grabs it with one of his flippers and tugs it enough so that the boy gets the message. "Backyard," Jinx says, and out they go.

Jinx isn't too swift getting down the stairs. He doesn't really have legs, just supports and wheels that have limited independent mobility. "I think we're going to have to put in a ramp," you say, pleased to have found a hidden cost.

"They said the house was fine as is," Laurie tells you, as Jinx pitches forward on his little orange face. He squeals, and Oliver can't move fast enough to get to him. It isn't necessary, though. Jinx extends one of his flipper things, rolling himself to one side...then both flippers extend, pushing him upright.

"Play?" Jinx says. Oliver laughs his really annoying laugh, then belts Jinx really hard. It doesn't hurt Jinx, of course, and doesn't even hurt Oliver much. He shakes his hand, and gives up that idea.

Then he climbs up on Jinx. "Ride ride ride," he says. And Jinx begins to roll around the backyard.

After watching this for twenty minutes, you're tired. "I was wrong," you tell Laurie. "I'd be happy to plug Jinx into his recharger any time he wants it. He's earned it."

* * *

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The next week, with Jinx keeping Oliver busy, comes close to that dreamlike ideal you have always imagined for parents with normal children. You find yourself hurrying through work because you look forward to coming home. With Oliver on such a rigorous schedule he's out cold each night, so you and Laurie actually start to get some sleep. Since you don't see Oliver sticking his filthy hands into your plate of pasta, you find that your appetite is returning.

Laurie is getting more work done and enjoying it more. Maybe it's those free time conversations about fertility brokers and all this talk about babies, because she's looking sexier. On Sunday morning, after six days of Jinx, the two of you make love successfully for the first time in four and a half months, though, of course, nobody's counting. Your only comment, as you drift back to sleep, is "We must do this again sometime."

Laurie laughs and says, "Did we even turn off the cameras?" The house was watching, of course, as Laurie ran into the bedroom for her diaphragm. Surveillance is part of the security system. Lazily you find the privacy switch, and show Laurie that it's still off. "Oh, well," she says.

On Monday, the beginning of week two with Jinx, the man from Landis stops by to check him out. And you offer him money, whatever it will take to keep Jinx. "Your wife explained about the monitoring?" he says. You nod. "Then you know that he's free as long as we're able to monitor his development."

"Well, then, how is Jinx developing?"

"I'm seeing some physical wear and tear," he says, "but nothing we can't take care of with a more durable covering." This makes you want to laugh out loud. Every time you see Oliver, he's trying to beat the shit out of Jinx. It's just Oliver's way of showing love and you're happy that it's Jinx on the receiving end instead of Brett Shaner. "The power use has been higher than anticipated, but we have a better class of battery on the way." The man looks at the house. "Any interface problems?"

"The house? I think it's getting along fine with Jinx."

"Good. Jinx's systems are totally reliant on monitoring and data from your house. Take him out of your yard and he's just a big paperweight."

You realize that you might not be quite ready to take Oliver on a trip out of town. But, then, you have more energy to deal with him here, now.

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It's not as though life has suddenly gone golden. You come home mid-week and find Laurie sitting in the kitchen with her eyes red. "Did Oliver do something?" It's the first thing you think of.

"No, he's fine." You can see him with Jinx in the backyard. "I spent the morning talking to the lawyer about our options." She means your baby options. "What Dr. Reyes said seems to be true. No one will help us."

"What do we mean when we say no one?"

"I mean, no clinic will assist us in overcoming our...problem." Your problem is that you don't get pregnant very easily. Laurie had two miscarriages before Oliver was born. You know you shouldn't even bother with birth control. "As long as we're using my genes and your genes, no one's going to match us up...not with a host mother, not with a sperm donor. Nothing."

You sigh, trying to be helpful. "There's always adoption."

Laurie looks at you with the face she usually reserves for Oliver. "I thought we went through all that." As if you needed to be reminded about what you went through, after the two miscarriages, trying to adopt. The host-mother you flew out from Provo who simply ran up some big bills in the apartment you rented for her, then went home three weeks before the scheduled birth. What were you going to do? Have her extradited? The girl who almost gave up the baby...the baby you were allowed to see, but not touch, because the girl changed her mind.

You're feeling a mixture of desperation and defiance. You take Laurie in your arms and kiss her. "There's always the old-fashioned way."

For a moment she seems confused. Then she pulls back and smiles. "Like you say, they can't put us in jail."

IN YOUR HEAD you know you and Laurie have a bad genetic history. There's Oliver, after all. But you also know that it's damned unlikely this particular genetic lightning will strike twice. All your friends and contemporaries have children in school. Their lives revolve around their activities. You are slowly being left out, since Oliver's activities have less and less to do with those of a normal child. Worst of all, you're finding yourself spending all your time with the parents of other special

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children, an understandably obsessed bunch — people you wouldn't choose to spend time with.

What you really hate is having your choices made by someone else. But you can do something about it.

You and Laurie both know the drill, since you've done this three times already. You were pretty scientific about getting pregnant before. Dates of ovulation, body temperatures, you know it by heart. The key thing is to do it. And with Jinx keeping Oliver busy, you sort of feel like doing it.

You can't be too cold blooded about it, however. Part of you wonders if maybe that wasn't the reason the Oliver conception went wrong — it was too much like a factory job. No, this time it's dinner out, a little romance, something out of a wine commercial. With Jinx on the case, you can even engage a sitter. And go out. And come home to find her sleepy, as sitters should be, with Oliver sound asleep in bed. "Where's Jinx?" you ask Laurie.

"Standing watch," she says, pushing the door back to show you. There he is...a perfect little orange sentry in the darkened corner of Oliver's room.

You pay the sitter, who actually says she might be free again next weekend — this is a new experience with sitters for Oliver — and she goes home. And you and Laurie relax on the couch. The TV is on...she flips it over to some racy movie. And, like teenagers, you start peeling each other. It's a relief not to think about protection or control. You stop bothering with the clothes and enter her.

And stop moving almost immediately, because Jinx is standing in the living room. You're almost too far gone to care. He is, after all, a machine. Would you fuck in front of the lawn mower? Next question.

Jinx burps or makes some damn machine noise, then rolls back to wherever he lurks. But Laurie is rolling away from you and sheepishly pulling herself together. "God, we haven't even closed the drapes."

You want to grumble that you were on the floor and anyway it's after midnight, and those theoretical peeping Toms are actually criminals, not people you are going to see at the market tomorrow. But it's too late. You are both a little tipsy and a lot tired, and there is no completion.

That's Saturday night. On Sunday you take Oliver to a movie, then let him go wild with Jinx until dinner. You and Laurie start necking in the

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bedroom, door only slightly ajar, while the boy and his machine are in the backyard. And damned if they both don't come crashing inside looking for "Coke coke coke" just as it's about to get serious.

One thing leads to another, and the golden moment — that is, the time of greatest conception — passes. Laurie has her period, and you have a couple of nights of free and passionate fucking, with no interruptions, which only makes it all the more infuriating when it starts happening again.

"It's Jinx," you tell Laurie. Oliver's fuzzy orange companion has been with you now for six weeks. You feel terrible saying anything critical, since this has been the happiest six weeks you've had since Oliver was maybe two.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Laurie says. So you walk her through the evidence, which basically comes down to this: every time the two of you try to make a baby, something interrupts. She can't question the data. "You make it sound like some kind of plot. How is it being done? The house?"

Your smart house sees every move you make. "The house has cameras and microphones and I suppose it even knows how much money we're not spending on Ortho-Gynol," you say, "but basically it's about as dangerous as a refrigerator."

"Then who or what is doing it?"

"Jinx. It's hooked into the house, now. The house watches and Jinx goes to work."

"Fine," she says, humoring you in your paranoia. "Why? Just tell me why someone doesn't want us to have sex."

"It's not the sex," you say, "it's making a baby." And Laurie, who is smarter than you in most things, anyway, opens her mouth to correct you, then shuts it again.

"That's a pretty serious accusation," Dr. Reyes says. He is sitting in the living room having coffee. You can see Oliver and Jinx in the den next door. "That somebody is trying to keep you from conceiving a child."

"Why? Nobody wants us to conceive a child. Including, if I'm not mistaken, you."

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Reyes looks at you, at Laurie, and sets down his cup. "You two are lucky."

"Why do you say that?" Laurie snaps.

"Because you have good lives." Before I can yank his head around to make sure he sees Oliver, who is plucking orange fur out of Jinx, who is looking distinctly more threadbare, he adds: "I don't mean you've never been disappointed. Or that you're going to get whatever you want. I mean that, compared to much of the human race, you both grew up in happy, stable homes."

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"The genome maps are showing us that most of what we think of as bad behavior, whether it's tendencies toward violence or substance abuse, is genetic. Speaking developmentally, you play the cards you're dealt."

"Nature, not nurture."

"Nature more than nurture. Absolutely. We're just beginning to realize how...people can be different. How lives can be improved by this knowledge. We can't select from a genetic menu to make a perfect baby...yet. That's years away. But we can...assist people with their choices, and thereby save a whole generation from abuse, neglect, pain." He spreads his hands, looking genuinely sorry. "Genetically, you two should never have gotten together. Your maps make one of the worst fits I've seen."

"Maybe we should just get divorced." Divorce has become an ugly word in the Naughts.

"Neil." Laurie knows about your temper, especially where Reyes is concerned. Even Reyes can see that he's cut a little too deeply. After a moment he says, "We're not dictators. There's no conspiracy. Your...situation presented itself."

You don't like the sound of this, either. "How clever. Of our 'situation,' that is."

"Why couldn't you tell us in the first place?" Laurie says suddenly. "Why turn us into lab rats?"

"I did tell you."

"So what is Jinx, then?" you say. "The first step in some giant social engineering program?"

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"No," Reyes says. "Jinx was developed for kids like Oliver. We only thought of the...opportunity for positive reinforcement later."

"Suppose we tell you to take that thing out of here?"

Reyes stands. "We aren't dictators. We're simply giving you an option." And he goes out.

The rest of the afternoon seems long. Laurie calls the Landis people, and even though it is a weekend, they promise to get right over. You let Jinx and Oliver play in the backyard one more time while you wait for the van to arrive.

Laurie looks at the houses around you. "I wonder how many of our friends shouldn't be together...shouldn't have children."

"From what I've seen, I'd say all of them." But you know that's unfair. You are good friends with perhaps six couples in the neighborhood. Four of them are doing fine. Their kids are happy and healthy. Of the other two, one couple is a clear mismatch across class and educational barriers, if nothing else: you know they've been in therapy because both of them are abusive, and you know their kids are going to carry on that family tradition. It might have been better for all concerned if someone had...intervened.

You think about what will happen over one generation, two, ten, with a little science invading the areas of mating and reproduction. Will people be happier? Will people be better?

You think over these past six weeks with Jinx, and you know the answer.

"Neil," Laurie says, leaning on your shoulder, as the sound of Oliver's relatively happy laughter reverberates off the houses, as Jinx patiently, tirelessly keeps him busy.

"We can't," you tell her. "Jinx is for us, too." She looks at you through tears for just a moment before she goes out into the yard. You are hearing the sound of a little voice saying ABCs...saying "I love you Mom and Dad"...kicking the ball and smiling. From the kitchen window you see Laurie holding hands with Oliver, holding on to Jinx.

The voices fade. You realize some of the tears are yours. You wipe them away, then get up to cancel the Landis cancellation.

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Brief Reviews: Books

The Other End of Time , by Frederik Pohl, Tor, 1996, $23.95

IN THE NEAR future, Earth receives the first message from space. Every news station broadcasts the message, a video of bizarre alien figures, soon to be dubbed the Seven Dwarves. In the meantime, Dan Dannerman, agent for the National Bureau of Investigation, has worked his way into a job at cousin Patrice's observatory. The Bureau wants to know what's going on with the observatory's abandoned astronomical satellite, Starlab.

Dan finds himself and four others on a mission to the derelict satellite, dubbed Starcophagus due to the dead astronomer still aboard. But the Starlab isn't in the same condition the humans last saw it. The Seven Alien Dwarves have done some remodeling and our human crew are on their way toward the eschaton, the place where all who ever lived, human and alien, will live again forever. Or will they?

Grand Master Frederik Pohl gives us yet another inventive, action-packed novel that raises some interesting questions about Heaven and an eternal afterlife.

Patton's Spaceship, by John Barnes, HarperPrism, 1997, $5.99

A terrorist act robs art historian-in-training Mark Strang of his pregnant wife, his brother, and his mother, and leads him to take up body-guarding as a way of life. In the midst of a special assignment, he encounters more terrorists and discovers they come from a parallel timeline...and he's off.

This ripsnorter of an adventure across parallel timelines has a high, headless body count and many explosions, plus fabulous new weapons, icky villains, and a cool timeline where Athenian Greece set all the standards.

This is the first book in Barnes's Mark Strang series, and it's a fast, fun read. It slows in the center for

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an infodump of alternate history on the main parallel world featured in the story, but the account is probably a lot of fun for military buffs, and not too slow for less interested readers. *Patton's Spaceship* leaves one anxious for the next book.

Mordred's Curse, by Ian McDowell, AvoNova, 1996, $5.99

Be warned: this entry in the Arthurian genre is different. It isn't *The Once and Future King*, nor *Camelot*, and it sure as hell isn't Disney. And *Monty Python and The Holy Grail* is right out! What it is, however, is a look at the legend from Mordred's own point of view, written as though it were his autobiography.

McDowell takes us back to Mordred's youth, to the tender age of eight, and chronicles the events that lead to his miserable existence at Camelot, up to the wedding of Arthur and Guinevere. McDowell explores the conflict of Arthur's fervent belief in Christianity and the mixed bag of pagan rituals practiced by most of the rest of the Britons, and comes up with some compelling ideas. *Mordred's Curse* is a fast yet richly detailed read; fast perhaps for the lack of archaic language (Mordred thinking a sarcastic thought: *Yeah, right.*) yet detailed enough to feel like medieval Britain.

Mage Heart, by Jane Routley, AvoNova, 1996, $23.

This debut novel has some familiar fantasy riffs (Dion is the only female mage at a college of mages, and is treated badly) and even more familiar romance riffs (I am strangely drawn to him despite evidence that he is evil and means me harm).

It is a fairly compelling read despite the déjà vu; the author's sentence-by-sentence writing is evocative, her scene-setting nice, her world-building and magic-system construction intriguing, and her political intrigues gritty. The protagonist has a strong streak of prudishness, and another main character has a strong streak of anti-prudishness, so there is nice tension between them. Occasionally the plot is too transparent for its own good, but it does take some surprising turns.

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Esther M. Friesner made an appearance in these pages last month with one of our three cover stories. That *story was delightful and strange, as only Esther's work can be. But we think she's outdone herself this month.*

About "Miss Thing," she writes, "This is not the sort of story that should be explained (or excused)." We agree, and we hope you will too. After all, nothing — absolutely nothing — compares with "Miss Thing."

Miss Thing

By Esther M. Friesner

AT THE CLUB THEY SAID it was a match made in heaven. Cherisse was looking for a new roommate (Yvana had moved out after a silly argument about *some* people's elastic ideas concerning private property) and this little sweetie was just as obviously looking for a room. Otherwise why would anyone choose the underside of Signora Pitti's makeup table for sleeping quarters?

Signora Pitti wasn't pleased with the discovery, to say the least. Signora Pitti was the club's grandest of the grand divas (How many could present both a flawless Marlene Deitrich *and* a Marilyn Monroe even more credible than the original?) and God help anyone who forgot that! Rage wants a target, and since no one could find the security guard whose job it was to exclude *hoi polloi* and importunate fans from backstage (and certainly from beneath makeup tables!) there was only one possible victim for Signora Pitti's nuclear hissy fit.

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"Out!" One huge, white-powdered hand pointed eloquently at the dressing room door. An inch-long crimson claw merely served as punctuation. "Get out of here, you *riffraff!* You *troll!* You *ragamuffin!* You — you — !"

"Hush, Pitti," Cherisse cut in. "Can't you see you're scaring the poor child half to death?" It had been no easy task to plow through the mob of performers (agawk, agawk-o) jamming the dressing room doorway, but this was Elbow-Fu in a worthy cause. One glimpse of the pitiful creature's wide, limpid, terror-stricken eyes and Cherisse had no choice.

Of course there were the expected rumors. Everyone knew Cherisse was looking for a roommate just as much as the waif was looking for a room, but as to what else they both might be looking for...

Cherisse heard the whispers all right. No sooner was the foundling shepherded out of Signora Pitti's range and under Cherisse's silk-draped wing but they began. They flew through the dressing rooms, airy as a flutter of gauze scarves, hard and sparkling as the glint of rhinestones.

" — so pretty. Just wants a little fixing up and — "

"*Pretty*? Darling, that's like calling the Titanic a dinghy! I know gorgeous when I see it and I'm telling you that child has got gorgeous to — "

" — tossed *that* little bit of flotsam up on our shores, I wonder?"

"Oh, you know, the usual. There's a broken heart for every light on Broadway."

"Call *this* Broadway?"

"Oh, shut up, Desirée."

"A broken heart? Hmph! I'll bet I know who did the breaking. Did you *see* those eyes? Lashes out to there, and so thick — ! I tell you, it just isn't fair."

"Don't sulk, love. That's why God made mascara."

"Oh, get real. If a mascara wand came within five feet of those lashes I'll eat it!"

"I'm sure you will, angel."

"Bitch."

"Tsk. Touchy, touchy. You're just jealous because Cherisse pounced first."

"Hunh! Cherisse is welcome to the whole package, which includes an

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all-expense-paid trip to Dump City not too far down the road. I'm telling you, and you can just write this down for posterity, as soon as something better comes along it'll be *Ciao, Cherisse, thanks so much for everything, now get the hell out of my way!*"

"You think so?"

"Mhhmmm. *That* little number couldn't find commitment in the dictionary, and Cherisse is no spring chicken. You know how it goes."

"Well, we certainly know how it goes for *you*, Desirée."

And that was just in the first five minutes. The rumors continued for days, more tenacious than mildew and about as socially redeeming. By that time — days having passed, as already noted — Cherisse *knew*.

Knowledge — insight, rather — made the chatter easier to ignore. Cherisse did nothing to squelch the nastier remarks. No one would believe the truth for an instant, so why bother? The whispers had one thing right, at any rate: The foundling *was* gorgeous. Drop dead gorgeous, no less. Perhaps that was where most of Signora Pitti's ire had sprung from, sheer on-sight envy. Even without makeup, Zo was to die for.

"Zo?" Cherisse had repeated that first night, casting one protective arm over those broad but slender shoulders as they left the still-raging diva's dressing room. "Don't you mean Zo-*ee*, dear?"

"Zo. My name." The voice was soft and sweet, even if the words came out with that odd, oh-so-fascinating stilted quality that hinted at foreign climes, tropic moons, and old Dorothy Lamour movies. "Is it — hokay?"

"Okay," Cherisse corrected, and since the revue was done for the night, took Zo off for something to eat. Zo devoured four hamburgers, three orders of fries, two chocolate milkshakes, and threw up in the middle of the street outside the restaurant. Up until then, Cherisse's plans had been limited to giving the poor creature a decent meal and then saying bye-ee. ("Mother Theresa costumes don't come in my size.") But standing there in the street, holding Zo's heavy fall of gleaming black hair out of harm's way, Cherisse was unexpectedly blindsided by the old It-followed-me-home-Mom-can-I-keep-it? feeling. Some might call it maternal instinct, though in Cherisse's case...

"You're coming home with me," Cherisse announced when the last of the burgers hit the asphalt, and that was that.

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Three nights later, there was Cherisse and there was Zo, locked in the manager's office for an hour. Dear old Gary, so straight you could use him for a ruler, was a businessman to the bone. He wasn't about to give a job to something fresh off the street with — so far as he could tell — nothing on the ball but looks. Pretty? The club had pretty faces to burn. Gorgeous? That was another story, but one with the same ending.

"Look, Cherisse, the club's got a reputation to keep up, you know that as well as I do. Our customers don't just come here to goggle, they want to be *entertained*. Zo looks like a nice kid and all, but hey — ! The Salvation Army's six blocks down, okay?"

Those were his exact words. There were plenty of witnesses able to swear to that. While Cherisse went to the barricades for Zo, everyone else in the club just "happened" to have something intensely vital to do right outside Gary's closed office door, and those who couldn't come up with an excuse managed to drop contact lenses and earrings by the bushelful right there. *Quel* coincidence!

That's why there was also no end of honest folk able to testify to Gary's Road-to-Damascus conversion. They all heard Cherisse say, "Hold it right there. Not another word. You just listen." Then there was a could-be-anything *click* which turned out to be the sound of a portable tape recorder being turned on. There followed the sound of the legendary Miss Judy Garland singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." It wasn't a very good tape. It wasn't Judy as an adult, but as a child, dear Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. In fact, it sounded as if Cherisse had taped the song from a television broadcast of the movie. Then a second *click* and silence.

And into the heart of the silence — and every other heart within hearing distance — a living voice raised in song. Outside the office door, the crowd traded startled looks that swiftly turned to (often tearful) expressions of rapture.

"Oh...mah...*Gawd!*"

"That is *perfect*. That is just *so perfect*."

"Sshh! Gary's saying — "

Everyone hushed in time to hear Gary say what was in every heart just then: Zo was terrific. Zo was wonderful. Zo was...well, a little *frightening* — perfection does tend to terrify the bravest soul — but what the hell,

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notify Wardrobe, someone stuff that kid into a costume, Zo could go on tonight.

"Does that mean you don't want to hear the others?" Cherisse asked him.

"Others?"

Yes, there were others: Everything from Ethel Merman to Madonna, each as indistinguishable from the original as the Judy Garland. While Gary and the Ladies' Quilting and Eavesdropping Circle beyond the door listened, Zo delivered performance after bravura performance.

"I discovered this — this *outrageous* talent by accident," Cherisse explained. (And if no mention was made about other discoveries...be charitable; call it an oversight.) "We were back at my place, I was playing some old recordings while I hunted up clean sheets for the fold-out couch, and all of a sudden, what do I hear but *this!* Well, so then I took the next logical step and ran some videos, and take it from me, all the moves, all the mannerisms are just as perfect as the voice-thingie."

"So I see." Gary's voice was that of a True Believer. "The kid's a fuckin' chameleon."

"Please." Zo's original voice broke in. "What do you call me?"

"Darling, don't tell me you don't know what a chameleon is?" Cherisse was quick to supply the natural history lesson. "It's a revolting little lizard that changes color to blend in with the background. Within reason. I mean, plaids are right out."

"Ahhhh. For protection?"

"The condom of the animal kingdom."

There was a brief conversational parenthesis while Gary explained Cherisse's joke, then Zo said, "So. Yes. It is good to be safe, for the babies."

Gary was still laughing over that while he showed Zo where to sign the contract.

After Zo's maiden performance, Signora Pitti opted for early retirement. In the new kid's knife-edged shadow, the best Marlene and Marilyn would only look like half-assed parody. However, Gary stressed just how much a real trouper owes to loyal fans, so Signora Pitti compromised, converting what had once been a star turn into a comedy routine.

"They're only going to laugh at me anyway, once they've seen Zo," the dethroned diva was heard to remark.

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And so it was that after that night, the club split into two factions: Those who envied Zo and those who envied Cherisse.

There was absolutely nothing Cherisse could do or say to convince the latter that there was no cause for envy. None at all. No, really, none, because —

"She's female." Cherisse leaned into the glow of the makeup mirror, fiddling with a stroppy false eyelash. "I'm telling you, she is one hundred percent female."

"Oh, *please.*" Signora Pitti, now performing under the name of Miss Pittipat (and sharing the common dressing room), continued to fight the good fight with a substandard Cleopatra wig. "Why don't you just tattoo the poor infant with a *Hands Off* sign? It'd be *much* subtler."

"I'm not kidding. Look, we *live* together. I've *seen* things."

"Well, so have I." Miss Pittipat yanked the wig off and flung it to the floor, exasperated. "If my mama'd ever had one of *these* the size of Zo's, I'd've called her Daddy." Those same formidable fingernails, now tinted pearly pink for comedy's sake, touched the telltale bulge of cartilage just above the cheesy gilt pectoral (Ancient Egyptian kitsch-on-a-budget R Us). "I mean, I'm lucky; mine's not too big, but Zo — ! Apple my ass, *that* Adam's got a fucking cantaloupe!"

"Jealous," Desirée mewed.

Cherisse didn't want validation, just belief. "Listen, I don't care if Zo's got a bulge the size of — "

"I'll *bet.*"

"Oh, shut *up*, Desirée. As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, all that Zo and I are to each other — all we can ever be — is roommates. That's it. *Nada más.* For the pure and simple reason that Zo is, by her own admission, female. Got it?"

Miss Pittipat stroked Cherisse's back and cooed, "There, there, darling, you don't have to rationalize with us. We're all getting older. We can't expect the young ones to look past the surface to the substance. So you made the move and you got the brushoff, been there, done that, bought the T-shirt. Bought the whole damn T-shirt *company*. You'll find someone else."

Cherisse's scream was sheer reflex, heartfelt, and therefore tenor. "Zo *said* she's female, dammit! She said it in so many words! She may be a

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little bit flaky — Christ knows, my finger was *this* close to dialing 911 after some of the other stuff she told me — but as far as this goes, I believe her, so why don't you believe me? I mean, why would anyone want to lie about their sex?"

The laughter that followed that unintentional sally didn't die down until Gary came storming into the dressing room and told everyone to put a sock in it. On reflection, this wasn't such a fortuitious turn of phrase either, but at least they all stopped laughing at Cherisse.

Desirée spoke up after Gary left: "If Zo's so female, then who was that nice Chinese gentleman I saw her with last night?"

"What nice Chinese gentleman?" Cherisse asked, a trifle wearily.

Desirée grinned. "Won Hung Lo."

Miss Pittipat had pretty good reflexes or all the hours Desirée had spent before the makeup mirror becoming Carmen Miranda might have come to naught then and there. Though Cherisse struggled to give a healthy young right cross its freedom, the doughty ex-diva held both hands and insisted that the joke didn't merit fisticuffs.

"What joke?" Desirée drawled. "The other night I came into Zo's dressing room by accident — "

"Didn't you just." Miss Pittipat could still deliver sarcasm capable of drawing blood.

" — and *some*one I could mention wasn't in costume," Desirée went on. "Just undies."

"So of course you looked."

"And you wouldn't?" An expressive shrug dislodged a little of the glitter-laced powder sparkling on Desirée's shoulders. "The last time I checked, I wasn't dead. Well, let me tell you, if *that's* how they're building women these days, I may have to do a whole lot of rethinking about my lifestyle. And you know, I think those were just plain panties, no reinforcement, no nuthin'. There's only so much strain that ordinary nylon and elastic can take, something's gotta give, and when it does — ! I am going to make a novena so that I am there for *that* coming-out party."

"We get the idea, Desirée," Miss Pittipat said, solid ice. "We can take a hint."

But Desirée couldn't. "That infant is carrying a concealed weapon.

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You know the saying, *It's got a mind of its own*? Darlings, what Miss Zo's got tucked away ought to be in Mensa!"

This time Miss Pittipat's reflexes were just a skosh too slow to prevent the inevitable. Cherisse never took boxing in college, but enthusiasm often counts for more than expertise. Desirée caught air and made a three rhumba-ruffle landing against the far wall. That night, Carmen Miranda wore an extra layer of pancake and didn't need any rouge on one cheek.

Gary was summoned but met a brick wall when he demanded to know the cause of the altercation. Partial ignorance didn't stop him from dispensing punishment. Cherisse got suspended for a week, no pay, with the option to quit outright if there were any objections.

"As if I'd object!" Cold lager poured into the pilsner glass on the café table. Cherisse wrung the beer bottle's neck without remorse, then set the drained corpse to stand with the ranks of its previously dispatched brethren. "Desirée's right, you know: I'm no spring chicken. I'm a day too old to go making the rounds at other clubs. It's not as if I were a celebrity like Miss Pittipat. I'm just an old warhorse, and I can smell the gluepot from here." The glass rose from the table full and returned almost empty.

Zo leaned across the table, eyes swimming with compassion. "This is all my fault. Yes. You keep my secret, you suffer."

"Honey, I didn't keep your secret. I told everyone you're female. Everyone except Gary, natch. I'm sorry, if that was supposed to be just between us — "

"Oh, *that* is no secret!" Zo waved away Cherisse's apology. "Anyone ask, I tell the same. But it is the other things I tell you. You do not tell them?"

"Not a breath." *I have no desire to wind up in a strait jacket, thank you, they do nothing for my figure.*

"So. Good. You are brave as well as beautiful. You would be a great warrior like me."

"Thanks all the same, but — "

"And when there is the babies, I will make you co-mother, even if you have not killed anyone yet in battle. This is a great honor; you have earn it by merit, if not by blood."

Cherisse's face went as white as the slowly ebbing foam in the pilsner

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glass. "Zo, think carefully before you answer this question: *What* babies?"

"You know what babies. What I tell you when you first open your home to me, may the foremothers' blessings attend you: The babies I come here to conceive, to bring into the light far from war, in all tranquility."

"Oh yes, I remember." *I remember almost calling Bellevue. What war? What foremothers? Why me? Oh God, I need another drink!* "Mmhm, sure, you did mention babies. In fact you seem to mention babies an awful lot, every chance you get, ever since you got here. You're not — in *trouble*, are you?" It would explain why Zo had gone to ground under that makeup table, and she *was* female; she'd said so. Cherisse also remembered how Zo's first meal had made that messy curtain call in the middle of the street. It all fit.

Zo looked puzzled. "Babies are no trouble."

"I wouldn't know."

"Not these babies. They will be no trouble at all, once conceive. They will be *our* babies, dearling Cherisse!" Zo's innocent joy was a treat to see.

"*Our* babies," Cherisse repeated, deadpan. "As in yours and mine? Uh, I don't think so, love."

"Why not?"

Cherisse explained. Zo nodded happily, then explained a few things back. Cherisse ordered a boilermaker. These were times that demanded more emotional fortitude than could be found in mere suds. Boilermakers needed no explanation. Boilermakers were Cherisse's brand of Zen.

When the drink was history, Cherisse demanded, "You're *not* still sticking to that story?"

"What story?" Zo's legendary eyelashes fluttered.

"The one you handed me when I first brought you home. I mean, sweetheart, there's no further need to lie to Auntie Cherisse; you're employed now. You have a roof over your head and food to eat that isn't coming out of *my* take-home pay. You're pulling your own weight. Hell, for the next week you're pulling my weight too, as far as household expenses go." Cherisse procured a second boilermaker. "I am not going to toss you out on your cute little heinie if you tell me who you *really* are."

"I have...mistaken?" Zo's delicate eyebrows made a common frown into a thing of beauty. "I thought I told you right, but — I do not use the

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right word? Alien, yes? Alien. Ohhhh! No, wait, I know a better word, I hear it on television: *Extraterresticle!*" She looked proud of herself.

While Cherisse choked on the half-inhaled boilermaker, Zo went on: "I know it is different for you. To be co-mother is just, ah, *ceremonial* name. Still, you will help me until they are born, you will help me after. My own birthing-mother says it is too much for one to handle alone, all the babies, and our males are no help at such a time. They are only good for one thing, she says."

"Your mother was a very wise extraterresticle," Cherisse said, blotting up the last of the shpritzed beer and whiskey from the tabletop. "Okay, I give. God knows, I've been trying to come up with *some* way to explain you that didn't involve Steven Spielberg, but when you add what you've told me to what I've seen — You know, sweetie, most earthlings do *close* the bathroom door — it's just no use. My brain's no more elastic than my thighs, more's the pity, and I simply can't make it stretch to fit you. So fine, have it your way, you are not of this Earth."

Zo leaned across the table and gently clasped Cherisse's hand. "You are mad at me?"

"No, baby."

"Baby!" The magic word transformed Zo's expression of concern to a radiant smile. "Ohhh, Cherisse, just you wait until you see them, they are so *cute* when born, so small, and so many! When the old ones tell me I am to be the vessel, the honor of it — ! It is because I extinguish myself in battle so nobly, hoping I will be chosen. I always want to have babies, this is why I kill so well. Very fiercely, almost as good as a male. All so I can be a mother."

Zo chattered on, rhapsodizing about the glories of battle and the joys of maternity. Through a mental fog thickened by alcohol, Cherisse's mind attached itself to only a few key words.

"How...*many* babies was that?"

"Fifty at least. Maybe more if I please my male. They fight well — all they would rather do is fight — but they do not like to do anything else. So me, a female, I must get him alone, away from battle, to some quiet place where he can do some sex instead. How long it takes to get them to calm down and do something besides kill — !" She clapped one hand to her forehead, a grand gesture copied chapter and verse from Miss Pittipat's

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repertoire of vapors and fantods. "Some of them *never* want to sex."

"Dear Lord, you *are* an alien," Cherisse muttered.

"Males here are different?"

"Let's put it this way..." Cherisse hated to quote Desirée, but it couldn't be helped. "Have you ever heard the phrase *It's got a mind of its own*?"

"What does?" Zo asked. Another explanation (aided and abetted by another boilermaker) and Zo said, "Oooooh." She clicked her tongue. "You are very lucky. Our males, like I say, they fight. This is one thing they are good for."

"Pardon me, I thought — "

"No, no. For sex they are *useful*, not good. A big difference. They are so — cranky? Bad tempers, and all those *sharp* things! Teeth, claws, poison spit, and the stinger — !"

"I don't think I want to know where they keep that little accessory." Cherisse shuddered. "Darling, if you don't mind my saying so, your males sound so very, um, nasty-looking, but you're so — so — "

"I drop dead being gorgeous," Zo decreed.

Cherisse decided to let that pass. "What I'm trying to ask is, couldn't you girls do *better*?"

"Not if we want the babies."

A sigh reeking of boilermaker drifted over the table. "The things we do for love."

"And sex," Zo prompted. "Do not be forgetting sex."

"I'll make a note of it."

"Good. Because once my mate calms down and becomes interested in sex instead of killing things, he should not be disturbed. They do not like to be interrupted once they, mm, catch on."

"Trust me, honey, once your cranky little Casanova arrives, I'll give the two of you all the privacy you can stomach. I have absolutely zero desire to get between Mr. Poison Spit and his happiness. Tell me, what does one wear to greet a groom-bearing spaceship?"

"But he is — " said Zo.

"Of course it wouldn't be a *big* spaceship, would it? Certainly not for your honeymoon. Don't they always tell you girls that size isn't everything?" The boilermakers had formed a workers' cooperative with all of

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the previously ingested beers. Now they labored mightily together to eradicate all of Cherisse's mental *No One Likes a Motormouth* signs. "And besides, if it were big, I don't think it could touch down unnoticed anywhere around here. They'd have to land in Jersey, for God's sake, and if the George Washington Bridge traffic isn't the anti-aphrodisiac of all time — !"

"But we are — " Zo tried again.

"I mean, his ship has to be at least as small as yours, because here you are, sprung up in our very midst quiet as a dust bunny, no UFO reports on the tube, no special edition of *Hardcopy*, not even a plug on *The X-Files* — Say, is it just me, or does everyone think Fox Mulder is *hot*? God, I hope it's just me: Who needs the competition? — but here you are anyway. Such a nice, quiet, discreet little alien. If that's what you are. I mean, who's to say? I can't even make the rest of the girls believe you're female, so why should I let you convince me you're an ex — ex — " The boilermakers reached a unilateral decision to shut down a few collateral branches of Cherisse's speech center, and the beers could like it or lump it. " — extraterestrogen? Maybe it's the next step, the new challenge: Why settle for gender-bending when you can go galactic? Although where we're ever going to find a garter belt to fit Jabba the Hutt, I don't know."

"But — " Zo was nothing if not determined. This time she was able to add, "But my mate — "

"Alien impersonators! The new wave!" Cherisse's expansive gesture, meant to welcome the future, only succeeded in knocking a tray full of drinks from the grasp of a passing cocktail waitress. In the unavoidable aftermath (It was a very tolerant bar as far as dress codes went, but the bouncer had no respect for how easily a silk dress can wrinkle) it was Zo's turn to hold Cherisse's hair out of the way while the boilermakers, the beers and the sun all came up together.

That afternoon Cherisse awoke to find that the blessing of alcohol-induced amnesia had decided to take a day off. Every word, every action from the night before was sharp in memory. Zo said nothing about it, but Cherisse's sense of guilt was the new, self-starting model.

"Sweetie, about last night — " Cherisse blushed, then winced with pain. The hangover gods had sent one of those exquisitely fine-tuned specimens that reacted to the slightest physical movement, even unto the

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vagaries of cheek capillaries. "I'm — I'm sorry for what I said about, um, for saying you're not who — what you say you — Oh hell, I'm just sorry I was such a jerk, okay? I was drunk. That's the reason, not an excuse. It's just I'm so upset about my suspension. I like what I do. I guess all those magazine articles were right. You know the ones, about how some men have no sense of identity beyond their jobs? We are what we do."

Zo clasped Cherisse's hand. "You believe me?"

Cherisse managed a weak smile. "I've got to admit, it's not easy, even given some of the stuff I've seen about you. That detachable finger, the one you left on the bathroom sink Thursday...some ordinary people *do* wear prosthetics like that. And your — your — well, I've heard of cleft chins, so when I saw you get that lipstick smear off your teeth with your tongue I just assumed that it *could* be possible for some people to have — Oh, Jeez, the bottom line is you don't *look* especially alien. I mean, we Earthlings are programmed with certain...expectations in that department: You're not green. You're not bug-eyed. And for the love of God, woman, what *did* you do with your tentacles?"

Zo regarded Cherisse steadily and replied, dead serious, "Falsies." After which all was in-the-teeth-of-hangover laughter.

"Okay," Cherisse concluded. "So we're agreed: You're an alien, you come in peace, you need somewhere quiet to get your mate to come in peace — Did I say that? — and then you'll have a gazillion babies and go home. Right?"

"And you will be co-mother," Zo prompted. "Entitled to same honor as I, also same protection."

"Well by all means let's use our protection," Cherisse said.

After that, the week passed without incident. In fact, when Cherisse finally did return to work, it was with a wonderfully satisfying sense of accomplishment.

"Not only did I catch up on the laundry, I got to go to the zoo, do a little *shop*-ping, and I finally taught Zo that we *close* the bathroom door when we're using it, yes we do. Do you want to see the new shoes I — ?"

"Cherisse, Gary wants to see you in his office." It was Mitzi, a.k.a. the Velveteen Vulture. If there was bad news in the air, you'd hear a loud flapping of mighty wings and you'd see Mitzi, ready, willing and eager to do a crash-dump of disaster.

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So long as it was someone else's disaster, of course.

"Me? But I just got off suspension. Jesus on a pogo stick, Gary's the one who called me yesterday to make sure I was coming in tonight! What the hell is this?"

"You and Zo," Mitzi said, trying to look solemn and sympathetic. It was a botch job.

Cherisse went searching for Zo but couldn't find her. Mitzi trailed along after, looking so pert and cheery and helpful that Cherisse wanted to take Mitzi and a box of Girl Scout cookies and —

"Get a hold of yourself," Cherisse gritted, *sotto voce*. "There are some things a lady just doesn't do. Not even to Mitzi. Not even with Do-Si-Dos."

"Did you say something, honey?" Mitzi chirped.

"I said it would be a huge help if *you* could find Zo for me. I don't want to keep Gary waiting."

"Done and done."

Cherisse found Gary behind his desk, Desirée at his side. Desirée wore a look of gloating triumph a hyena might envy. Gary didn't look happy.

"Where's Zo?" he asked.

"Mitzi's getting her."

Gary sighed. "Maybe it's just as well she's not here. Cherisse, we all know you're very fond of Zo — "

"We're just good friends. Oh God, did I say *that*? But it's true. Is there a — ? Wait a minute." Cherisse went to the office door and checked outside for eavesdroppers. There were none; it was too close to showtime, everyone was preoccupied with makeup and costumes. Satisfied, Cherisse shut the door and concluded: "Is there a problem?"

"Not...about that." An awkward silence fell, decided it liked the place, and settled in to stay. Gary began chewing the end of a pencil.

"Gary, you haven't got the makings of a beaver. Take that dirty thing out of your mouth and tell me what's wrong!" Cherisse snapped. "Is it Zo's behavior backstage, her performance, her appearance, *what*?"

"You might say that." Desirée's teeth flashed. "*Her* appearance."

"Desirée tells me that Zo's really a woman." Gary looked apologetic, as if everything were his fault.

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Cherisse's eyebrows went up like the elevator at Bloomingdale's. "*That's* the problem?"

"It is if you're trying to pass yourself off as a drag queen," Desirée sniped. "*Victor/Victoria*, my ass. Our customers won't stand for this kind of crap."

"And *have* any of our customers complained?" Cherisse spoke to Gary alone, giving Desirée the nuclear winter cold shoulder.

Desirée was frostproof. "You want to wait until they do? This isn't the only club in town. Gary, back me on this, you're the one who's always talking about how we've got a reputation to keep up. You know how fast word gets around?"

"No faster than you, speaking of reputations," Cherisse growled.

Desirée assumed a look of hauteur. "I take that remark whom whence it comes. Slut."

Gary tried to regain control. "Look, Cherisse, I don't have Word One to say against Zo, but Desirée does have a point: This is a drag club. We get a real woman on that stage, word gets out, we could get our asses sued for truth in advertising. You tell me there isn't some litigation-happy jerk out there who wouldn't do it! Desirée tells me you're the one who said Zo's a woman in the first place. Is that the truth?"

Cherisse remembered the last time Zo had forgotten to close the bathroom door. Cherisse had been in a hurry and Zo had been in the bathtub. Zo didn't believe in closed shower curtains either.

"Zo is definitely not a woman," Cherisse declared. *No more than a mare or a hen or a cow or any female not of the human species. It's not a lie, it's linguistics.*

At that moment, the office door opened. Preceeded by eight inches of bouffant wig, Mitzi peered around the edge and announced, "Knock, knock! Here she is! Gotta run; I'm on in five." The wig popped out of sight and Zo swept into the room.

She was dressed for the stage as the legendary Marilyn Monroe, wearing the halter-dress which that icon (and a subway grate) made famous in *The Seven Year Itch*. She looked absolutely aglow with happiness. Without a nod or word of greeting for Gary or Desirée, she flew into Cherisse's arms.

"Finally, finally he has decide he loves me!" she cried. "It is all going

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so nice, *so* well! It happens in the dressing room, he lets me know he wants me to go outside, into the alley, and there it begins!"

"In the alley," Desirée repeated, chewing over every syllable to extract the last bit of juicy goodness. "My, my, Princess Di, I haven't seen you since finishing school."

Cherisse pushed Zo to one side and surged for Desirée, who squeaked and ducked behind Gary. "Just one clear shot, that's all I want! Just one, and I don't care if you fire me after!" Cherisse suited the action to the words, but Desirée bobbed out of the way. "You think I don't know your game? With Miss Pittipat doing comedy, all you need is to get rid of Zo so *you* can take the star spot!"

"Or *you* could, sweetie." Desirée blew a kiss. "*Love* your Lassie."

Cherisse started around the desk, fists ready. Desirée backed off, using Gary as an almost-willing human shield. Gary made all sorts of shooshing, pacifying noises and gestures at the enraged Cherisse, none of which did a tinker's damn of good. Zo stood all alone, hands pressed to her mouth, in an agony of distraction.

"Oh my goodness, Honored Co-mother, what is all this?"

"Don't worry, Zo dear," Cherisse said grimly, still closing in on Gary and Desirée. "I'm only going to kill Desirée. New York State waives the death penalty for bitchicide."

"So? I can kill this one for you if you want, I can do it fast and easy, leaving no drops that spot, but — but any sudden moves would disturb — Oh dear — And they *do* get so cranky if — Just the worst temper you could ever — oh dear, oh dear, what to do, what to do?"

While Zo dithered, Cherisse's advance had moved Gary and Desirée all the way around to the far side of the desk. Desirée glanced over one shoulder at that portal to safety, the office door. The only thing in the way was little Zo. Taking a deep breath, Desirée shoved Gary mightily, right into Cherisse's arms. Equally taken by surprise, the two of them went crashing to the floor while Desirée made a break for it —

— and in mid-break suffered a change of mind. "I'm settling this once and for all!" With astonishing deftness, Desirée grabbed Zo's arm and twisted it behind her back with one hand, getting a headlock on her with the other. Zo gave a half-choked cry of distress and tried to writhe free, but Desirée countered her every move. "You're not the only one who took

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self-defense at the Y, darling," Desirée hissed in her ear.

"Zo, for God's sake, you're a trained soldier! Fight back!" Cherisse yelled, struggling to get off the floor. The new shoes didn't help. One heel snagged itself in the cuff of Gary's slacks and Cherisse hit the dirt once more.

"I can not!" Zo wailed. "To do it is too — is too violence! It takes me so long to get him in the mood, I will have to start all over, and then the babies — "

Her words reached Desirée as just so much gibberish. People with their own agendas generally suffer from selective deafness. "Either she's a woman or you're a liar!" Desirée shouted at Cherisse. "There's just one way to prove which, and I'm going to do it *now!*"

There being no subway grate to provide a handy updraft, Desirée dropped the armlock, dropped the headlock, and before Zo could react, yanked up her dress.

"Whoa!" said Gary, staring at what lay revealed. He sounded more envious than amazed. "Sorry, Desirée, but from the look of *that*, I'd say Zo's got every right to keep working here."

"I do not *want* to keep working here!" Zo cried, unsuccessfully trying to jerk the skirt out of Desirée's grip. "Not after this. All is still quiet, but oh, what harm you might have done!" She glowered at Desirée. "I must go now, *now*, before you do disturb him!"

"Oh, lighten *up*, sweetie," Desirée sneered. "If you ask me, the only thing disturbed around here is — "

It was a sentence destined to die unfinished, cut off in its prime by a loud, distinct, resounding *SNAP!*

Desirée had been right: There was just so much strain ordinary nylon and elastic could take. Zo's flimsy unmentionables gave way at the waistband and plummeted ankleward. Zo's squeal was so inarguably feminine that Gary automatically clapped his hand over his eyes and averted his gaze, despite what he had just seen. Not so Desirée, who bent over for a good, close look at — at —

"Hey!" No shortchanged *hausfrau* ever sounded more peeved by a heavy-thumbed butcher. Still clinging to the upflung skirt, eyes up close and personal, Desirée stared at Zo's *really* unmentionable and declared, "*That's* not a — !"

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Which was all Desirée got to say in the matter. Apparently the sudden draft counted as a disturbance. The source of Zo's much-envied bulge uncurled itself from its snug harbor at the base of her abdomen and fixed Desirée with a narrow, orange stare.

It was small, but it made up for it by being ugly. A crest of shiny spines slowly stood up straight along its backbone. A tiny mouth opened to astonishing proportions to bare a double row of just-as-astonishing fangs. A low, warbling growl welled up from its throat as slim, wicked claws unhooked themselves from Zo's flesh.

"Now, now, dearling, do not be — " Zo crooned one heartbeat before the creature launched itself straight for Desirée.

"They never listen," said Cherisse wearily, and went to fetch the fire extinguisher.

Several minutes of assorted chaos afterwards, when Zo had finally recaptured her mate with a combination of feminine wiles and an upended wastebasket, she turned sorrowful eyes to Cherisse. (Gary was busy applying long-disused Boy Scout first aid skills to Desirée's face. Unless he'd earned a merit badge in plastic surgery, it was a lost cause.)

"Now you will betray us," she said. "You will call your — your authorities, yes? We will fight. We must. And we will die. There will be no babies."

"Angel, the only authority that's going to see you is the Port Authority." Cherisse spoke with assurance. "You tuck your hubby back into your undies and get on the first bus to anywhere, okay? We're not going to say anything until you're gone."

"Va hell ve're nod!" Desirée gurgled from under several pounds of cotton wool.

"Oh, shut up before someone ties a tourniquet around your neck," Cherisse snapped. "You brought this on yourself and you know it. But if you want to call up the F.B.I. with some story about people with aliens in their panties, don't let me stop you. I mean, you look like *such* a reliable witness."

"Oong." Desirée subsided.

"Good choice," said Gary.

Zo threw her arms around Cherisse. "How can we ever thank you?"

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"Go to Newark, have lots of babies, and don't invade Earth later on," Cherisse replied. "Oh, and buy a better grade of underwear."

Zo gave them all one last, dazzling smile, stowed a still angrily chittering male of the species somewhere beneath her dress, and vanished from Gary's office, the club, and Cherisse's life.

Cherisse sighed. "Well, gentlemen," he said, turning to Gary and Desirée, "I trust that we have all learned a little something from this experience?"

"Gonk?" Desirée inquired.

"Don't buy cheap underwear?" Gary asked, a tad more articulately.

"No, love." Cherisse smiled fondly at the club manager. "Sometimes it really *does* have a mind of its own." ☙

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Ian Watson has written a number of short stories since the publication of his latest novel, and we were lucky enough to get two of them. One is this month's cover story. The other will appear sometime in the near future. (That novel, by the way, is Hard Questions, *a technothriller about quantum computers and the mystery of consciousness.)*

About this story, Ian writes, "One rainy day years ago, our daughter Jess — who's now a textile designer — painted four of our cats past and present on a wooden box, and added a marmalade one. We'd never had a marmalade one, and the box went into a cupboard, forgotten. It was Jess who rediscovered the box last year — and lo, she had foreseen our present feline resident. He isn't actually called Duffy, but the vet's bills for his bold and eager behavior are real. Selling this story defrays those somewhat."

The Last Beast Out of the Box

By Ian Watson

DOWN AT THE BOTTOM OF Brook Lane, close to the ford, stood Brook Cottage — built of rusty brown ironstone, roofed in blue slate which lichen had yellowed. The only occupants were Janet Meadows, in her seventies, and her marmalade cat, Duffy.

On a Sunday afternoon in Spring, Amanda Whitaker brought her school sketchbook to show to the old lady — whose home was full of charmingly naive little pictures of cats and flowers painted by herself. If Amanda's dad hadn't spent that morning repainting a couple of window frames at home, the girl mightn't have noticed that the paintwork of Brook Cottage was cracked and peeling. Along the overgrown verge daffodils were dying, but in shaded parts bluebells were about to bloom. Recent downpours had swollen the brook till the ford had expanded into a huge pond, lapping the low footbridge.

Scarcely had Amanda rung the door bell than a crash resounded inside the house — as if an actual bell had fallen on to a floor.

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When Mrs. Meadows opened the door, she was sighing and shaking her head.

"Oh dear," was her greeting.

Short and stout, Mrs. Meadows wore a floral frock of forget-me-nots and primroses. Well-worn slippers were on her feet. Lines creased her face, mainly from smiling, though in repose the effect could seem hostile; and she was frowning now. The old lady's straggly unkempt gray hair was another reason for village kids to scare a new arrival about a witch living in Brook Cottage. Amanda had once fallen for this prank. By the age of twelve Amanda knew so much better about Mrs. Meadows' kindliness.

Right now, Mrs. Meadows seemed none too happy. Amanda clutched the sketchbook awkwardly. "Have I come at the wrong time?"

But the old lady gestured the girl to come in. "You can help me clear up. Duffy was on the sideboard. The bell startled him and he knocked a vase off."

"I'm *sorry* — "

"It wasn't your fault, dear."

"If I hadn't rung your bell just now — "

Along a dim hall they went, into a living room bright with sunlight and pot-plants and pictures. A china vase had shattered on the parquet floor. Pieces had hopped onto the central rug. Duffy skulked by the French window, a bewildered look in his eyes. Floodwater spilled across the far end of the lawn.

Mrs. Meadows opened the glass door and shooed her pet out. "Now at least he won't be able to cut his paw into the bargain!" Nodding toward the unkempt garden: "It would need to pour for another few days before I get my feet wet in here." Yet look, the sun was shining brightly.

"I'm so sorry about the vase — "

"Duffy once kicked himself in the eye when he was trying to scratch his cheek..."

Amanda giggled, and Mrs. Meadows smiled at last.

"The vet tested my dimwit's reflexes by pulling his back legs, but there was nothing wrong. 'You just happen to have a very clumsy cat, Mrs. Meadows,' he told me. Aside from that, Duffy's so lovable."

With brush and pan, on hands and knees, they hunted for all the fragments.

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"He's the only cat I've known who can fall off a bed! He rolls about on his back and forgets where he is."

"How many cats have you had?"

"Duffy's the fifth."

"I'd *love* a cat. Mum and Dad say it would be bad for my asthma."

"Not if he was your own special cat... Oh but it's always so sad when they die. You must take them to the vet. You watch their eyes glaze over. There's nothing to fill the aching emptiness except to get another one. Duffy's my last. He'll live as long as I do."

"How old is Duffy?"

"He's seven."

"He's still young, then — !"

"He's so daft I can easily imagine him falling out of a tree or even drowning himself in the brook. Actually," confided Mrs. Meadows, "I think his brain's a bit crumpled because he was the last cat out of the box. The other ones must have been pressing on his head."

"*What do you mean*?"

Mrs. Meadows brought the cat box, and set it on the low table next to Amanda's sketchbook.

"It's *beautiful* — !"

"I painted this when I was just a little older than you, Amanda, and — what do you know? — it all came true."

Hinged at the top, the wooden box was about five inches wide and high, perhaps ten inches long. On each side and on the lid, a different cat was emblazoned. On top, a mischievous black and white cat sharpened his claws on what might have been turquoise carpet. Black body, white mask on its face, white bib and socks.

Round the sides of the box ran a continuous landscape of turquoise grass spotted with flowers, trees and shrubs. A rainbow in the sky. Cartoony clouds. An orange sun. Chevrons of birds. In each panel, variously standing or sitting, were: a white cat with green eyes, a slinky all-black cat, a pompous blue-cream Persian, and finally a marmalade Duffy looking doleful.

Mrs. Meadows opened the box to reveal little pots of paint, then she shut the lid and tapped the top picture.

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"This is *Morris*. I'd had him for a year when I painted him. So I decided to paint some other cats to keep him company. Morris lived till he was seventeen, when he died of a horrid cancer in the throat. The very next day, a friend of mine arrived with a white kitten for me. My friend didn't know anything about my box. And I thought it was only a coincidence Snowy being on this side panel, here. Snowy lasted till I was, oh, forty-three. He was so eager — forever licking me. Oh the rasp of his tongue on my ear! He smelled quite like a boiled egg, and compared with Morris he wasn't much brainier than an egg — "

Next, had come all-black Poppy. Poppy was underweight but incredibly bright and busy. If Poppy had been a human child, she would have been classed as hyperactive. What a hunter she was. Cut a swathe through the local mice and shrews and moles and sparrows and robins, she did. It still only seemed rather more of a fluke that Poppy should follow Snowy, exactly as on the box.

The blue-cream Persian, Susie, clocked in when Janet was fifty-two. This could no longer be a coincidence. Susie was a pedigree, and her registered name was Moonflower of Dunesk. However, she wasn't a showable cat. Janet acquired Susie as a gift from the breeder, who was keen to dispose of her. A tooth grew askew in Susie's lower jaw. Her snub nose was too flat for her own comfort. Breathing difficulties affected her eyes, but she lasted pompously for fifteen years. During her last year Susie took to wetting on the floor. She howled as if she'd forgotten where she was. Kidney trouble claimed her. By then she'd become as senile as an old lady in a nursing home.

And into Brook Cottage had wandered young stray Duffy, who'd probably forgotten how to find his way back to his former home, though nobody ever claimed him.

"My marmalade dimwit followed my Persian, exactly as on the box! I'd painted a prophecy with my inks." Mrs. Meadows smiled. "Now let's see your work, shall we?"

Why, this sketchbook was splendid. Such realistic pencil drawings — of jam jars with pencils in them, and kitchen implements. A food processor. Tools from the garage. All the shading was perfect. Marks were nine out of ten, sometimes nine-and-a-half. The art teacher at school, Mr.

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Peters, was very keen on realism and accuracy. But here at last was a fine vase of daffodils.

"Such skill," enthused Mrs. Meadows. She glanced at her own pictures, which weren't photographic but were surely more expressive. "Maybe there could be a touch more...magic? No, I see you can't do that at school. Food mixers and spanners!" The old lady leaned toward Amanda. "I *think* if you were to paint this box of mine the way I did, using the colors inside, then...what you painted might come true, just the way it did for me."

"But," pointed out Amanda, "the box is already painted."

"We only need to slap white paint all over it first."

"It's *beautiful*."

"Oh, it's rather faded compared with what it was once. So it needs new pictures on it. The old ones are used up."

Duffy had toured around the lawn. He had sniffed the flood and now returned to stare plaintively through the the glass door. He began to miaow but the miaow became a yawn.

"Soon, Duffy, *soooon*," Mrs. Meadows cooed. "Now Snowy, my boiled egg, he would paddle away at that door with his front paws as if he thought he ought to be able to walk through the glass. My cleverest cat was Poppy — oh, and I mustn't forget Morris — but none is dafter than Duffy; though never mind. I'll tell you what, Amanda: I shall paint the box white myself. Come and collect it after school tomorrow. Then you can paint it as you like, just as I did."

Amanda pondered. "What do you think I ought to paint?"

"Whatever you please! Whatever you *want*! That's my assignment to you, dear."

On her way homeward up the lane, Amanda thought about cats dying. Of a growth in the throat. Of failed kidneys. Of muddled brains. Her special cat wouldn't die for years and years yet, not till Amanda was almost thirty years old, which was scarcely imaginable. Surely there was no need to visualize a whole lifetime of cats. What else would Amanda wish for? Not in another fifteen years time, and thirty years time, and fifty, but now?

The girl did realize that Mrs. Meadows was indulging in a delicious fantasy. But mainly, the old lady hoped that a touch of magic would enter

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Amanda's art, to accompany the nine-out-of-ten skill at drawing. Amanda wasn't offended, not at all. Spanners and food mixers were all very well! That was too much like Dad, who was an architect. To evoke magic, *of course* she should believe in the effectiveness of painting the box. Mr. Peters had shown Amanda's class photos of the first pictures ever painted by people, when people still lived in caves. The motive, said Mr. Peters, had been to summon up those animals so that hunters could kill them for food.

Mrs. Meadows wasn't as fanciful as she seemed. And without a doubt Amanda must only paint living creatures on the box, not something cold and mechanical such as a new bicycle.

NEXT SATURDAY, Amanda worked in her bedroom all morning. Mrs. Meadows' style seemed to rub off upon her, though admittedly Amanda was copying the way she remembered it. It was as if the white background preserved a ghost or memory.

Just before lunch, she finished the box. Taking care not to trip, she carried it downstairs on a piece of cardboard and set it upon the tiled worktop in the kitchen.

Lunch was to be a salad of pâté, spring onion, hard-boiled quail's egg, leaf of lettuce, and a cherry tomato, accompanied by rye biscuits. Amanda's mum, Sarah, was thwarting her daughter's tendency to plumpness. Her dad, Paul, could well lose a few pounds too. In the early evening the Whitakers would eat more lavishly. Sarah's own figure was slender, and she had gifted Amanda with her looks, her pert oval face, her curly blond hair. Stocky Paul must have contributed the genes for build. What of the girl's artistic eye? Paul Whitaker was an architect, but Sarah had trained as a landscape designer and she worked part-time as a consultant at the big garden center eight miles from the village.

"Why, that's lovely," Sarah exclaimed. "It's so fresh, so bright, so different. It looks Indian, like those little boxes you buy in Asia Emporium. It isn't from there, is it?"

"Hardly," said Paul. "The colors still look wet. Is this a school project?"

Amanda shook her head. "It's my *pet box*. Mrs. Meadows gave me the

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box and the paints last weekend. Whatever I put on the lid and the sides will happen, she said. On the lid, which is first, I put..."

A white cat with green eyes.

"Your asthma, Amanda," Sarah gently reminded her daughter.

"Mrs. Meadows said that a pet from the box wouldn't harm me. Oh, it's all right, Mum! I know it's make-believe. I really painted the box so as to...well, freshen my style; *loosen* it."

"That's rather a mature attitude," marveled Paul. "But...don't let your work become too loose. Mr. Peters wouldn't approve."

"I'm not trying to be an *architect* with my box, Dad! I already know how to draw. This is different. It's a bit of...magic."

Sarah hastened to praise the box again. On one side was a Scottish Terrier with wiry jet-black coat, stumpy legs, and a look of dogged loyalty as if on dwarfish sentry duty. On the second side: a red hen. On the third: a gray Chinchilla rabbit.

"Whatever next? A goat?"

Dominating the final side was a rearing snake with a brown body patterned like a bicycle tire, and a flaring hood.

"Good God, that's a *cobra*!"

"I know it is, Dad. I started to do an ordinary snake, 'cos I thought since snakes don't have fur a snake couldn't possibly give me an asthma attack. Then I felt it ought to look more dramatic."

"It's certainly *that*," he agreed. "Reminds me of that nursery rhyme, in fact. 'The Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly.' The cat bites the hen. The dog bites the cat. The snake bites the dog."

"You don't like my box, do you? I spent all morning."

"Honestly," said Paul, "it's beautiful. It's imaginative. Just so long as you don't imagine...well, that an actual cat or dog..."

"As if I would! I'm going to show Mrs. Meadows my pet box after lunch."

"Oh dear," sighed Mrs. Meadows when she turned the box, bringing the cobra into view. Duffy's ginger tail fluffed out. He hissed, then scuttled. Something about the movement of the box must have startled him, since even the cleverest cat would be blind to pictures.

"Well, what's done's done, I suppose. You'll simply have to watch

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your step, Amanda." (Amanda was grinning, pleased at the surprise.) "I don't suppose it's very *likely* that a cobra would...I mean, I haven't heard of anyone keeping snakes around here. There aren't even vipers in these parts. It would have to be a grass snake. Those are completely harmless. In fact, I saw one swimming in the brook a couple of weeks ago. A grass snake would even fit into your box. I do wish you hadn't!"

"Should we paint that side white again? Shall I do a different animal?"

"You can't! Not now. You made your choice. It'll be a grass snake, you'll see."

"*When*?" demanded Amanda.

"It'll be the last one out of the box, won't it now?" Mrs. Meadows said reasonably. "That mightn't be for years and years. Oh dear, but you mustn't ever go to India, or wherever cobras live. Promise me that."

Amanda chuckled. She was enjoying herself. Really, the snake had been a wonderful inspiration.

"What if I'd painted...ooh, a dinosaur? Just a baby dinosaur?"

Mrs. Meadows concentrated. "Well, those were lizards, weren't they? The modern version would be...a newt?" she speculated.

"I saw a program on TV which said that *birds* are descended from dinosaurs." Amanda pointed into the garden in mock alarm. "Watch out, here comes Tyrannosaurus Robin!"

Was Mrs. Meadows almost fooled for a moment?

"Robins are fierce to each other," the old lady said sternly. "If you're a beetle, they must seem like demons." Turning the the cobra to face Amanda, she laid her hands on the cat-lid as if conferring a blessing. "Take care of yourself."

A week later, the white cat came into the Whitakers' lives. Presenting itself on their kitchen windowsill, it mewed insistently for admission. Thanks to Amanda's pleas, Sarah conceded that they could open a can of sardines and feed the animal on the patio. No sooner was the door open than the white cat rushed inside. It leapt on to the worktop, from there on to Amanda's shoulder. A-throb with purrs, it rubbed itself against her cheek.

Amanda didn't choke. Her airways didn't block up with any sudden

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constriction. She didn't need her ventilator. A few days later, Paul installed a cat flap in the kitchen door.

Amanda was just a little concerned that Duffy might have met with an accident, being as how the box had been repainted and had now produced a new cat — seemingly. Of course this was all a bit of make-believe. But even so.

A visit to the old lady reassured her.

"Duffy's linked to me by love, and by all the time we've spent together," Mrs. Meadows told Amanda. "I'm here all day long, after all."

Amanda couldn't be home all day long, no more than her Mum or Dad could.

Snowy, named in honor of the old lady's earlier pet, proved to be deaf. Even loud noises never caused an ear to twitch. The driver of the oil delivery truck, a month later, protested that he had hooted and hooted again.

Naturally, Snowy didn't hear a thing. Pray that he felt nothing, either. Spine broken, head crushed. It was as Mrs. Meadows had said: the sheer grief, never mind that Amanda had only known Snowy for a few weeks.

Into this aching void there trotted MacTavish, soon to be abbreviated to Tavvy. No collar, no name-disk — but in fine condition. Paul pinned a card on the notice board in the village and in surrounding villages, but no one phoned to claim the Scottish Terrier, so chunky and obedient and friendly and all the things that he ought to be.

Six weeks later, while Amanda was walking Tavvy on her return from school, the Pattersons' Boxer bitch leapt a fence and savaged the Scotty to death. It didn't even help that Amanda was there in person. Her terrified screams brought neighbors, and Sarah too, but the Boxer already seemed abashed. Sarah phoned the police, who were unhelpful. Soon Paul was back. So were the Pattersons, who had left their dog to roam their garden during the day. Bitter words volleyed. The Pattersons certainly did not intend to destroy their beloved Boxer who was usually as meek as a kitten, so they insisted.

When the Whitakers went into their back garden to bury Tavvy, a red hen was there — with russet body, greenish tail-feathers, red comb and wattle. The hen eyed Amanda and clucked.

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No one nearby kept poultry. After the burial of Tavvy, Sarah drove to the garden center to buy chicken wire and stakes. She and Paul erected an enclosure for the solitary hen, walled and roofed with wire.

"There, that's like Fort Knox," Paul announced when the work was done. "How long do hens normally live?" he asked. "Three years? Five?"

Amanda cried herself to sleep, her pet box on her bed beside her.

Her father brought home a large hutch in which the hen could roost. And hay and chicken feed.

For a while Amanda refused to name her hen. Mrs. Meadows' talk about the death of pets seemed like a curse. Was a hen any substitute for Tavvy or Snowy? She ought to have painted cats and cats only.

As though to establish her individuality, the hen layed a brown egg. Sarah had found out that the breed was called Welsummer. A good season surely awaited the bird. So Amanda named her hen Summer. Only later did she remember that Autumn follows.

Could she love a pet which might die? Anxious because of this while at school, her work suffered a bit. She knew the hen was safe in the stockade. However, the bird might develop a hen illness such as pox or diarrhea, or she might pick up gapeworm. Even so, the long Summer holiday had almost arrived, the holiday with Summer — not that a hen was quite as communicative as a dog or a cat.

That year, the Whitakers didn't go away to the seaside or abroad. Neither Amanda nor her parents were willing to leave Summer to a neighbor's care. Nor actually did Amanda want to leave at all.

Going back to school in September was a wrench, though surely the hen had established herself by now.

Come the mists and the nights drawing in, at Amanda's insistence Paul had installed a heat-lamp in the hutch. By the faint light they could check on Summer from the kitchen window before going to bed.

In that soft red glow they spied the cause of commotion in the hen-run. They'd been watching television in the lounge. Muted squawks brought them hurrying into the darkened kitchen. A fox! Paul was outside in a couple of seconds. Amanda too, and Sarah. The fox forced an exit through loose wire and made off.

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Summer lay amidst bloodstained feathers.
How Amanda shrieked.

They bought Bunn at a pet shop. He was a gray Chinchilla — and friendly, though with a tendency to nip.

Might it have been wiser to take a kitten from a late litter, or a puppy? No, Amanda insisted. What she had painted must happen. Only then could it stop happening.

Paul had looked up cobras in a book at the library.

"What you painted *could* be a King Cobra, and they're shy. I can't see behind the head to be positive — the hood's so wide. But it looks to me like a Monocled Cobra. If so, it's one of the most dangerous snakes in the world."

"But Dad," insisted Amanda, "it'll only be a harmless grass snake — because there aren't any cobras here! Mrs. Meadows told me so. Grassy will be the last beast out of the box. Oh you were right about me not needing pets! But while Bunn's here we must be kind to him even if he does nip fingers."

The girl was psychologically disturbed. The only way to purge the poison from her system had been to buy Bunn. At least this was a deliberate choice.

"It'll *only* be a grass snake next," Amanda persisted. "It'll come from the brook. Mrs. Meadows said so. We must never ever go on holiday in India — "

Amanda hadn't been to visit the old lady for months. She didn't want to, nor would her parents have allowed it. Neither Sarah nor Paul could think of a sane way of confronting Mrs. Meadows. What could they possibly say to her?

"It's Autumn," said Paul. "All snakes hibernate. Nothing can happen till Spring."

A fortnight later, the fox returned. The wire had been well repaired, and overnight the hutch was always fastened by a hook.

Yet the fox burrowed deep under the wire as if digging a den. It nosed the hook out of its slot.

Amanda was surprisingly calm. Sarah, less so.

"Bring that wretched box from her room," she ordered Paul. "Amanda

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can't sleep in there with it! Carry it carefully. We should smash it to pieces."

"But Mum," protested the girl, "that's my box. I painted it. Why carry it carefully if you want it smashed?"

"Not in your bedroom I don't."

"We have to wait for the snake! Then we'll be all right."

"Shall I bring the box down and *nail* it shut — ?"

"The sides are too thin, Dad. Nails would split the wood."

"I'll tie it tight with garden twine."

"If it's tied, why can't it stay in my room? That's where it belongs, don't you see? Otherwise, things mightn't happen properly — not if it's away from me. You don't want it here in the kitchen, Mum, or in the lounge, do you?"

"It can go in the garden shed."

In the shed the air would be damp. The lovely ink-work might spoil. Oh no, the box must stay close to Amanda while she was dreaming. By now she seemed on the verge of hysteria or an asthma attack. Paul took a roll of green twine up to her room to tie round the box right where it was, on the floor near the bed.

Amanda's cry brought Paul and Sarah from their bed in their matching paisley pajamas.

The sudden flood of electric light revealed Amanda sitting upright. The beast box was shuddering, shifting to and fro. Paul's knots were slithering slowly open, as though the thinnest of green snakes was wrapped around the box, and now it was untangling itself. How the box rocked. Amanda scrambled along the bed to join her parents.

Her father seized a plastic ruler from beside some school books, and brandished it. "A cobra can't fit inside! Maybe a baby one — but who's scared of a baby?" Could a baby snake make a box lurch so vigorously?

"Dear God," moaned Sarah. The twine was coming undone. The lid began to lift.

"Grassy," called Amanda. "Come out, Grassy. Be a good snake, now."

Up rose a flared hood.

Raised ribs extended the whole of the creature's neck. Black eyes glinted. A thin tongue flicked in and out. A body resembling a brown

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bicycle tire began to uncoil from out of the little box, coil after coil appearing. That box ought to have been five times as big to contain so much body.

The hood dipped. Briefly they saw a large eye-mark behind the head: the monocle.

And snarling ginger fur rushed past Amanda's legs. Paul cried out loudest in startlement. Bristling fur, claws, bared teeth: a mass collided with the snake. Brown body lashed; hooded mouth gaped. The cat's teeth closed on the snake's neck at the very same time as the snake bit its attacker's flank.

The snake slumped.

"Duffy!" squealed Amanda. Mrs. Meadows' pet lumbered past her and out of the bedroom. Next thing, Duffy must have tumbled headlong down the stairs. Such a crash. Such a noise of breakage.

The cat wasn't to be found, but the tripod table at the bottom of the stairs had toppled over, throwing a Victorian majolica vase filled with teazles and pampas grass to the floor, shattering it.

Duffy must have gone out through the cat flap. Barefoot, in their pajamas, the Whitakers hastened into the chill of the night. From around at the front of the house came another sound of something breaking. Flowerpot toppling off a brick, perhaps. They hurried along the side path, the ribbed concrete so cold underfoot.

Halfway down Brook Lane, a solitary lamppost shed yellow light. They could see a cat staggering, falling over, pulling itself up again, and lurching onward down the lane.

"We'll catch our deaths," protested Sarah.

Skirting the wreckage of the majolica vase and strewn contents, they ascended cautiously to Amanda's room. Had they really seen a cobra? Or had some hysterical folie gripped them? A shared delusion, which they had been all too prepared to perceive?

On the floor lay an open box and twine and a slim green snake, about eighteen inches long, and dead.

"It squirmed in through the flap into the heat of the kitchen, then came upstairs," declared Paul. "That's what happened. *Do you understand?*"

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To Amanda, her father seemed unhinged.

Amanda said carefully, "I think the real animals killed the dream animals. The Boxer killed Scotty. The fox killed Summer and Bunn. The dream lasted much longer for Duffy because he was Mrs. Meadows' dream. Duffy must have sensed the cobra coming into existence. Or Mrs. Meadows sensed it. But if her dream's dead now — "

"Don't you talk that way!" snapped Paul. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Tomorrow morning," persisted Amanda, "will you phone the police and tell them we think Mrs. Meadows is dead in her house because we haven't seen her for such a long time? You could say we're worried she's ill or had a fall. That might sound better."

Kneeling, Amanda gathered up the grass snake and folded it into the box where the little pots of paint lay higgledy-piggledy.

"We'd better bury this in the garden beside the others." She rounded on her parents accusingly. "You don't seem to know what to do! I was right about the snake, wasn't I?"

"Yes, you were right," said her father. "It was just a grass snake."

"Mrs. Meadows is gone now."

"What makes you say so?"

"You know it's true. All the beasts have gone. Will the box rot in the soil? Do you think in thirty years time, when we aren't living here anymore, a boy or girl might dig the box up? I think Mrs. Meadows *loved* me, Dad."

"Not nearly as much as we love you," said Sarah, tears in her eyes.

"I think," said Amanda, "people live as long as they're loved. I suppose Duffy loved Mrs. Meadows in his own cat way. But we didn't love her. And Duffy was only her dream, come to life. Then her dream died, saving me. Mum, you and Dad won't die as long as I love you. I mustn't be angry with you. But people grow up, don't they? I'm never," she vowed, "going to fall in love with some boy and get married."

"Do you know," exclaimed Paul, "you haven't had an asthma attack for absolutely ages."

"Mrs. Meadows cured me, Dad. The beasts broke my heart but they cured me."

Already Amanda sounded so grown up, and therefore such a stranger.

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Discovering new writers is a reader's greatest joy, and because an editor is merely a reader who gets paid for doing what she loves, such discoveries are all the more delightful. So it is with Iowa writer Deborah Coates. "Tally" is our introduction to her, and a strong introduction it is.

About the story, she writes, "When I was young, we had friends who lived in the country at the end of a long driveway. One day someone drove down that driveway and shot one of the dogs from the car. My own dogs are Rottweilers and there have been Rottweilers who've been poisoned by neighbors, run over by police and dumped in ditches, shot and killed for their owners' 'crime' of leaving the gate unlatched....I protect my dogs when I can and worry that I may not always be able to..."

Tally

By Deborah Coates

PETERSON KILLED THE DOG on a cold windy Tuesday afternoon. He shot it in its own front yard for no other reason than that he didn't like dogs. And he laughed as we came running from kitchens and garages and back yards to find out what had happened. He laughed at Kelli Horoshi, the girl Elizabeth hired to walk Seaboy in the afternoons while she worked, laughed at her as she knelt on the damp ground and cried, holding Seaboy's head, and trying to stop the bleeding with the thin tail ends of her shirt.

The police came, shook their heads, and took Peterson downtown in handcuffs. He walked to the patrol car with a smirky kind of grin on his face. Kelli Horoshi's mother came too and took her home. Kelli couldn't stop crying and she kept apologizing. "I'm sorry. I couldn't help it." And we couldn't tell if she was apologizing because she couldn't stop crying or because Seaboy was dead.

No one quite knew what to do with the body, so I ended up sitting on the front lawn beside it until Elizabeth came home.

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She could see right away that something was wrong — me sitting there like that with Seaboy on the ground not moving — but she pulled all the way up to the garage before she stopped the car. She turned the engine off and sat there looking straight ahead.

After what seemed like a long long time, but was probably only a couple of minutes, she came and looked down at him. He was stiff and he didn't look real somehow with the life gone out of him. I'd always thought of him as noble, though I wasn't much of a dog person myself. He was big for a Doberman Pinscher, which Elizabeth said was a fault, but which I thought made him fine. He would stand sometimes on her porch in the summer twilight, listening. His whole body seemed alert, ears pricked, eyes bright, nose quivering, but he seemed relaxed too in a confident, poised way. He had looked a little out of place — as did cool and elegant Elizabeth herself — in our aging neighborhood of weathered bungalows and Prairie-style two-stories with wide, shaded overhangs. He looked like a prince standing at the entrance to his castle, surveying his territory with indulgence and serenity.

"What happened?" Elizabeth's voice was calm, but I knew how much she had loved that dog.

"Elizabeth, I'm sorry — "

"What happened?"

Even when I told her, her expression didn't change. "Thank you for staying with him," she said when I finished. Then, she turned and walked into the house.

I stood there with my shoulders hunched against the wind. What was I supposed to do now? I looked at Seaboy. Three years ago, I'd lost my husband when he wrapped our new Buick around a telephone pole. It hadn't been anyone's fault, except maybe his own — too many nights in the bars on main street. I missed him anyway, the bum, and if he'd died like Seaboy had, in cold blood, just like that, well, I can't even imagine how that would feel. Of course, Seaboy was just a dog. And like I said, I'm not a dog person. But still...

Elizabeth returned. She'd changed into faded blue jeans, an old flannel shirt, work boots and gloves. Her graying blond hair was still bound in the smooth chignon that she usually wore to work and it made a stark contrast to the faded utility of her clothes. The skin around her eyes looked as if it

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had been stretched tight. She carried a blanket which she laid on the ground beside Seaboy. She walked to the other side and squatted down beside him. She put one hand out and rested it for a moment on his shoulder. I almost cried.

A car drove by up on the main road, honking its horn at something or other, as if none of this were even happening. Elizabeth's shoulders hunched, then she straightened, and I never saw her falter again. She put both hands under Seaboy's body, rolled him onto the blanket, and started dragging him into the back yard.

I knew she didn't want me there. This was something private, and she was a very private person. But I couldn't bear the thought of it, that she would have no one. I grabbed the other end of the blanket and followed her.

It took two hours to dig the hole we buried Seaboy in. She chose a spot in the very back of the big yard, underneath a huge old sycamore tree. When we finished it was long past dark. My fingers were numb from holding the flashlight and my face felt like a block of ice.

"Come up to the house," Elizabeth said as she straightened and brushed dirt off her jeans, "I'll make coffee."

There was a bright comfort about Elizabeth's kitchen with its bleached oak cabinets, red countertops, and slate floor. Warmth began to seep back into my bones. The afternoon's events seemed surreal, unable to compete with the ordinary smells of brewing coffee and lemon-scented cleaner. I kept expecting to see Seaboy in his usual place on the woven blue rug near the sink.

Elizabeth poured two mugs of coffee, handed one to me and sat down. She seemed unable to settle. She kept looking at the leashes and collars hung neatly beside the door. Finally, she rose, walked into the back room, and returned with a large box. She stripped the leashes from the rack with Seaboy's name engraved on it.

"Elizabeth," I began, but she was already gone. I followed her into the study where she had opened the doors of the secretary desk. With great care and gentleness, she removed Seaboy's obedience ribbons, his tracking plaques, and his two high-in-trial trophies. "You don't have to do this now," I said, wishing I had followed my first instinct and gone home.

"Yes," she said, "I do." She went to the kitchen for a roll of tape, put it on top of the box and carried the whole thing up to the attic. I looked

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around the study, closed the secretary doors which she had left standing open, and, because I couldn't think what else to do, I followed her.

I found Elizabeth kneeling on the attic floor trying to tape the box closed. She was crying, brushing the tears angrily away as fast as they could fall.

"Let me help," I said, kneeling beside her. I held the flaps together while she taped them down. She taped the lid both ways twice. She taped around the sides three times. She taped every seam until the dispenser ran dry. Then she sat back and looked at it without speaking.

"It's not — " I began.

She threw the empty tape dispenser across the room. The sound as it crashed into an old washtub startled her, I think. She stood up.

"Why would he do it?" She started to pace, ten steps to one side of the attic, ten steps back to the center of the room. "Why?"

"I don't — "

She turned and faced me. "There was no reason. It was brutal and mean and there was no reason for it. And what's going to happen to him?" She was pacing again. "What? Nothing. Not really. A fine, maybe? A couple of months in jail? Community service? A little inconvenience for him and it's over."

I put my hand on the landing rail and rose. "That's about what happened last time," I agreed.

She stopped again. "Last time?"

I dusted off one of her trunks with my handkerchief and sat down. "Maybe that was before you moved here. He shot the Donalds' cat with a bow and arrow. Said it was an accident. They fined him five hundred dollars for cruelty to animals and made him pay the Donalds one hundred dollars to buy another cat, but that was it. And there was that other time too, when Mrs. O'Shane's poodle drowned. We could never prove it was him, but...".

Elizabeth looked fierce. "Why do you let him?"

"Let him? We can't do anything. What can we do? I mean, we call the police. I'm always the first one to call the police whenever there's any trouble." I was breathing a little hard and I was glad that Elizabeth turned away and started stacking boxes to make room for the new one. We'd never had cross words before, but she had a kind of nerve, even allowing for her

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loss. The rest of us knew better than to keep pets in Peterson's neighborhood.

"Look," she said a moment later as I was trying to decide if I should just leave or try again to talk to her. She held up a small lidded box. She carried it to the trunk, set it down and opened the lid. "These belonged to my mother. I'd forgotten they were up here." She pulled out a small crystal ball and blew dust from it. For a second the crystal seemed to glow, but she set it down and I realized that it was just a reflection from the dusty naked bulb above us. She pulled out a deck of cards. "Tarot cards," she said. She pulled other items, one after another. "Runes. I Ching." She pulled almost a dozen items from the small box. "My mother believed in all of this, you know. She'd read auras at parties. She talked to ghosts." Elizabeth's voice seemed affectionate and I remember thinking, how odd! Tarot and auras and crystal balls seemed more likely to embarrass someone like her, so cool and rationally self-controlled.

"What's that?" I asked, looking into the box.

Elizabeth removed a smooth blue stone with white and purple veins running through it. As she cupped it in her hand the veins seemed to shift beneath her fingers, flowing into new patterns initiated by the heat from her palm. "It's a tally stone." She stood.

"What does it do? The stone, I mean." I had a vague idea about the other things, the tarot and the runes and things, but I'd never heard of a tally stone.

"It's a tally stone," she repeated. "It keeps count."

"Of what?"

She looked at it intently. She rolled it over in her hand. It looked to me like a perfect oval. On one side an almost solid streak of purple cut through the smaller, more delicate veins of white and gray and purple. "It keeps a count of everything," she said. "When the counts are skewed, the tally stone can help right them." She held the stone away from her, looking at it in the light. "There are prices to be paid. But for those willing to pay them, the tally stone can be a powerful equalizer." She slipped it into her shirt pocket and walked over to the window.

"Of course," she said as she leaned her head against the glass, "that's only legend. It's not the truth. The truth is that someone can shoot your dog in your own front yard and you can't stop them."

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She walked me out, turning on the porch light before we stepped outside. I looked across the front lawn. Shadows hid the spot where Seaboy had lain and I wondered if we'd see it for a long time, a huge black splotch like an open wound to remind us every day until the snow came that he'd died there.

I looked back at Elizabeth, meaning to comfort her in some way that wasn't clear to me yet, but she wasn't looking at the front yard. Her gaze was turned up the street. Her eyes, usually a light golden green, looked darker, almost black in the oddly shadowed porch light. "As if it means nothing," she said.

I turned, and sure enough, lights were coming on three houses up across the street at Peterson's. "Elizabeth, don't..." But she was already off the porch and down the sidewalk. I followed, feeling as if I were in the middle of some disaster movie, but not really able to stop.

She walked right up to his front door and knocked on the aluminum storm door as if she were paying a routine social call. I stayed back in the yard, just out of the sickly yellow circle cast by the single grimy porch light. I was joined after a few minutes by Mrs. O'Shane, Peterson's immediate neighbor, who had told me last year that she never worked in her back yard anymore unless Peterson wasn't home. He sat on the back steps and threw loose gravel at her and told her that if she ever built a fence he'd burn it down. John Horoshi, Kelli's father, joined us, along with a couple of others. No one spoke; I don't even remember breathing. If they all felt like I did, then we felt we should be doing something to support Elizabeth. But Peterson was vengeful; he could make our lives hell without ever doing anything so bad the courts would hold him, and nothing we did would bring Seaboy back again.

Elizabeth knocked again. I could hear faint sounds, like a television turned up loud. There were lights on in the living room and upstairs in the front bedroom. I don't know why, but I thought maybe it would all go away, everything would go back to normal, if he would just not answer the door. I may have even prayed.

Elizabeth pounded on the door frame with her fist, determined more than angry. I could see, then, that she would stand there all night if she had to. She'd stand there until one way or another Peterson came outside.

The front door flung open. Peterson glared through the rusty screen.

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When he saw who it was, he grinned and opened the storm door partway, leaning against the jamb with his arms crossed and one foot holding the door.

"You shot my dog," she said to him, and the wind must have been blowing just right because all of us could hear every word, crystal-clear.

Peterson looked at her. His eyes flickered out to the yard. I didn't think he could see our faces, just shadowy figures waiting, like ghouls at a traffic accident. "Yah," he said, "it was barkin'. Like to bark all the time — yap, yap, yap — nearly drove me out my skull."

"No," she said, "he didn't."

"What?"

"He didn't bark. He never barked except occasionally when I was home."

His eyes narrowed and for a moment I thought he might take her seriously. Then his smirk returned. "Hah!" he said as he waved a hand, dismissing her, and took a step back into the house. She grabbed his wrist and she must have been stronger than she looked because it stopped him for a moment. He glared at her, then he jerked his arm away and the screen door slammed.

I held my breath, but Elizabeth didn't do anything else, just turned and walked away.

I didn't see her after that for several days. We were neighbors and we were nearly the same age — though Elizabeth looked years younger than I did; she ran twenty miles a week. But beyond that, we didn't have much in common. Elizabeth taught history at the university and had never married; I was a widow who hadn't gone past high school, worked three days a week at the hospital as a volunteer organizer, and didn't read much beyond the newspapers, family living magazines, and the papers my grandchildren brought home from school. I supposed it was hard for her. She'd done everything with that dog — Rose Hill's Certain Victory, CDX, UDX, and a bunch of other letters I couldn't remember — Seaboy's real name. They'd gone to obedience trials, tracking tests, nursing home visits. My grandson, Pete, said that she and Seaboy had visited his second grade classroom last year to talk about pet care and responsibility. They'd been in the back yard every evening. She'd throw a tennis ball for him to retrieve; they'd play tug-of-war with an old towel tied in knots. And in

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between, she would work with him on jumps and tunnels and dumbbell retrieves and precision heeling. They went running every couple of days. I wondered what she was going to do now that he was gone.

Monday around six, I came home from grocery shopping and saw her sitting on her front porch. The weather had improved in the last week; it was pleasant, though cool. I stopped for a moment with my three bags of groceries — not much to buy now that Jake and the kids were gone. "How are you doing?" I called across the drive, though I had a feeling she hated that question. When she was sick last year and I had brought her chicken soup and done some grocery shopping for her, I could see the muscles in her face and the skin across her cheekbones tighten when I asked her. The problem was, I couldn't help saying it. What else did you say?

She looked at me. "Fine," she said and went back to what she'd been doing, tapping something against her knee and staring up the street at Peterson's house.

I went on home and put my groceries away, but I couldn't relax, thinking about her sitting over there in the dusky twilight. I washed the supper dishes. The sun faded from the sky and the temperature continued to drop. I put in a load of clothes, carried a basketful of clean dishtowels upstairs, folded them, and put them away. Every five minutes I'd look out the window, hoping she'd gotten up and gone inside. Finally, I fixed some hot chocolate in a thermos and went over there to talk to her.

She had donned a down vest, hiking boots with heavy socks, and fingerless wool gloves along with her blue jeans and sweater. She didn't look cold. She didn't look as if she even realized that she was sitting outside instead of in her living room. In her right hand she held the tally stone, rolling it over and over in the palm of her hand.

"Elizabeth?"

She looked over at me and smiled, accepting the hot chocolate when I poured it for her. She gestured for me to sit down. The advanced twilight had turned everything to grays and blues including the air between us.

"How are you?" Like I said, I can't help it.

She didn't look at me as she replied. "I was never really brave, you know. My entire life I never risked myself. If a situation arose, I would stand at the back of the crowd waiting for someone else to act. If I was alone I froze, like a rabbit in the open. If you're quiet, if you stay in the

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background and you never take chances, you can live a safe, comfortable life without ever really acknowledging that you have no courage."

She took a sip of her hot chocolate. "But then I got Seaboy, and he changed me. I was brave. Not because he was a big dog with powerful jaws and protective instincts; I was brave *for* him. Because he needed me. When teenaged boys jeered and threw rocks at us in the park I confronted them. When a man tried to grab my purse in a parking lot one Friday evening and Seaboy was with me, I clobbered him in the head with my shoulder bag. Do you know why? Because I was afraid that Seaboy would bite him, that the police would come, that he'd be labeled vicious — they don't like Dobermans here — and I would lose him. He gave me everything he had — loyalty and attention and faithfulness — protection from harm was something I thought I could give in return.

"But all that, all the bravery, standing up for him so his life would be, I don't know — joyous, it all came down to nothing." She looked at me. "He must have been afraid, don't you think, when he died? He must have wondered where I was, what all the blood was, what was happening. When it really counted, out there, I couldn't protect him."

I didn't know what to say. What could I say? I'm sorry your dog is dead? Well, I was, but what good would it do to say it? "They'll punish him this time, don't you think? They'll have to."

In the long pause before she spoke, I heard a storm door slam down the street, I heard a car start up, and two separate train whistles on opposite sides of town. "They arraigned him this morning," Elizabeth said when she finally spoke. "He pleaded guilty. He stood up and said he was guilty and they fined him a thousand dollars."

"They must have given him some jail time. Or community service." I knew I sounded desperate. It seemed as if it would be everyone's fault, mine, the police, Mrs. O'Shane down the street, if there weren't, somehow, justice for Seaboy. "There must have been something besides a fine."

"Thirty days. Served on weekends. For discharging a firearm within city limits." Her voice was as calm as ever. It had never sounded so bleak.

"Oh, Elizabeth. I'm sorry."

"Yes. So am I."

It was two nights after that that the dogs appeared.

I had just turned off Ash and was driving up our street when I saw the

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first one. It was trotting right down the middle of the street, but it must have heard the car because I had just started to slow when it swung its head around, looked at me, and trotted off at an angle to the grassy curb. I slowed the car further. Seaboy had been the only dog in the neighborhood before he got shot, so it had to be a stray. I stopped the car. It was a small dog, maybe ten pounds or so and it looked like a poodle, but its coat was fluffy all over, not cut with those funny balls on the legs and tail. It had a cute face, a little short nose, little pink tongue hanging out. I realized that it was heading in the direction of Peterson's house and I got out of my car, thinking I could at least catch it and take it to the animal shelter. The last thing we needed around here was Peterson shooting another dog.

When I opened the car door, the dog turned and looked at me again. It had dark round eyes and it cocked its head for a moment, looking at me with curiosity and intelligence. I whistled, but it ignored me. When I took a couple of steps toward it, it took off into the hedge between two houses. Fine, I thought. I was too old to be scrambling on my knees through hedges for a dog too dumb to stay home. I clumped back to the car.

I had gotten into the habit of taking Elizabeth a thermos of hot chocolate every night around seven. Every evening, she sat on her porch watching Peterson's house. I worried about her; it made me nervous to have her sitting out there, as if none of us could pretend that things in the neighborhood were normal as long as she was outside reminding us. Taking her the thermos was something. At least, when I came back home I felt I had done something.

"My," I said as I approached her, "it's really starting to cool off, isn't it? First thing you know we'll have a frost and snow and we won't believe we were sitting outside clear into October." I had, finally, stopped asking her how she was doing. Pretending things were normal was now the best that I could do.

Elizabeth didn't answer. Instead, she rose from her chair and walked to the porch railing. "Look," she said and pointed with her gloved right hand, which also, I noticed, held the tally stone.

Across the street in the clear bright circle cast by the streetlight I saw two small white dogs — they looked just like the one I'd seen earlier — trotting up the street. "Do you know whose they are?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "I do." But she made no move to leave the porch.

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"Shouldn't you...I don't know. They're headed toward Peterson's house."

She didn't answer, just watched them. They looked like patches of white in the dark shadows across the street. I cleared my throat.

"I think they're fine," she said.

That first night there were only about six of them. They sat on the sidewalk in front of Peterson's house for an hour. They didn't move much. They didn't bark. A little after eight o'clock they hopped up without ever having made a sound and trotted away. I don't know that Peterson even knew that they had been there. The lights were on in the living room and in a couple of other rooms in the house. The porch light was on. But Peterson never came near the front door.

The next night they were back. They came back every night for a week and each time there were more of them. I would see them around seven when I walked across the yard to Elizabeth's house, trotting down the street as if they had no cares in the world. They were cute little things. They'd sit for an hour or sometimes a little longer in a half-circle in front of Peterson's porch. There were enough of them now that they sat in two rows waiting for something, Peterson, I suppose, but he hadn't appeared yet and the dogs kept returning.

Everyone watched them. Mrs. O'Shane would put on her navy blue wool coat, the one she wore to church on Sundays, and come outside onto her front porch. The Horoshis would slide the curtains open on the big bay window in their living room and turn off the lights. No one called animal control or the police. I'm sure no one thought it was normal. But why were they here?

"They look so serious sitting there," I said one night to Elizabeth. They'd been outside Peterson's house by then every night for seven nights.

Elizabeth watched them. "They're Bichons, you know. Bichon Frise is the name of the breed," she said. "They spend their lives as someone's fluffy lap dog — they're descended from the water spaniel, they used to go on boats — when they die, they die pissed off that no one ever took them seriously."

I looked at her. Was she kidding? I could see Mrs. O'Shane up the street on her porch. Once again, there were lights on in Peterson's house, but he was nowhere to be seen.

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Elizabeth sat up. "This has gone on long enough, don't you think?" she said as she stood and walked to the porch railing.

"This?" I wondered if she had always been odd. I wondered if I had just never noticed. I picked up the thermos and started to unscrew the top. "What do you mean, 'gone on long enough?' What?"

She didn't answer. At that moment, as I was unscrewing the cap from the thermos, as Elizabeth gripped the porch rail with one gloved hand, the two curved rows of fluffy white dogs sitting in front of Peterson's house began to howl.

I almost dropped the thermos. I'd heard dogs howl before. When Seaboy was a puppy he had howled at night in his puppy crate and I'd been able to hear him through my bedroom window. Mrs. O'Shane's poodle had howled sometimes when she left him home alone. But this...I'd never heard any sound so awful and yet so wild. There were so many of them that it went on and on. When one dog drew breath another one picked up. I expected fog to start rising from the ground. I expected the moon to drift behind clouds and a chill north wind begin to blow.

None of that happened, but Peterson finally did come outside.

From Elizabeth's porch I could hear the screen door slam. "Hey!" I heard him yell that, but the rest was lost in the wild howling. I could see him gesture at the dogs. They didn't move, just kept on howling. He came down off the porch. He clumped down the walk and swung back his foot to kick at the nearest one.

I suppose his heavy boots and his denim jeans kept him from being more seriously injured when they attacked him. I suppose all of us — me, the Horoshis, Mrs. O'Shane, and Elizabeth — were too surprised by the whole thing to take any action. I know that I stood there and watched them swarm around him like tiny sheep gone mad. I watched him kick and snarl at them as he stumbled back up the walk onto the porch. He kicked the last one clean into the porch balustrade. I could hear the crack clear up at Elizabeth's.

When he got the door open and got into the house, there was silence. The only sound on the entire street was the rustle of leaves as a breeze moved through the trees. One by one the little Bichons picked themselves up and shook themselves. One of them walked over to the dog that had been kicked into the porch supports, nudged him with its nose, then took

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a step backward as if not sure what to do next. The other dog, the one Peterson had kicked, lay there so still. Like Seaboy, I thought. Then, it popped up too, shook itself like the others, as if it was shedding water, and trotted down the porch steps. Together, all of them trotted up the street away from us. They were out of sight by the time Peterson came back out the front door with his shotgun. He fired it into the air anyway and shouted something that I couldn't hear.

After that the dogs changed. They were bolder, for one thing. One of them stared me down in my car the next evening. When I opened the door to shoo it away, it growled at me with its lips curled right back.

That night and the next night the dogs howled; Peterson roared out the front door with his shotgun. The dogs attacked his ankles and his knees. He kicked at them, fired until the gun was empty, then went back inside. The dogs picked themselves up (I swear, even the ones that had been shot — at least, we never found them lying out there) and trotted away.

After the third time, the police came and talked to Peterson on his front porch for a long time. They took his shotgun with them when they left. I figured he had more.

The following night it was cold with a hard frost wind blowing through the trees. I stayed inside and watched the street from my living room window. I couldn't see her, but I was sure that Elizabeth was outside sitting on her porch. It seemed like what Elizabeth did, sit on her porch, as if that's what she'd always done and we'd never known different. The dogs came, trotting down the street like always. They bounced up and down like puppets on strings; the wind blew their little fluffy ears straight out behind them; and yet, there was something, a sense of purpose maybe, that made me think of Seaboy when I saw them.

They sat, like they always did, in front of Peterson's. They howled. But tonight Peterson didn't come out. After about fifteen minutes (I thought I'd go mad from the howling. Like I said it just went on and on and on) I could see the dogs shifting as if they were getting restless waiting for Peterson. One would pop up while the others kept howling. It would trot to another spot in the line and sit down, then another one would do it.

Mrs. O'Shane was out on her porch. I couldn't really see her from

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where I was standing — her coat and her scarf were too dark — but occasionally I could see movement, like the tiny white blur of her face, when she shuffled her feet or turned away from the wind.

The dogs must have noticed her too. Suddenly, they stopped howling and turned all at once — it was eerie how synchronized it was — and looked at her. They didn't rush her, not like they attacked Peterson. I wondered at the time if they only did it because Peterson didn't come outside when they howled.

Whatever the reason, they started to move toward her.

You could say Mrs. O'Shane should have just walked back inside her house. But it's different sitting here after everything's over. It's different. If I'd been outside that night, if I'd been at the end of my porch a good ten feet from the door and had two dozen little snarling dogs suddenly stalking me...well I'm not sure I wouldn't have frozen too.

I couldn't hear anything through my closed windows except the rising rush of the wind. Across the street Janet Donald stood in her living room with the back of her hand to her mouth. The first dog was almost to Mrs. O'Shane's front steps. She hadn't moved. I wanted to shout at her, "Get away, get inside." Nothing else moved, except those little white dogs advancing steadily toward Mrs. O'Shane.

Suddenly, Elizabeth was out there running toward them. She stopped when she reached the front yard, hesitated for a moment as if she were trying to make up her mind about something, then she walked up the front walk. When she reached the advancing dogs they parted before her like Moses and the sea, closing ranks again as she passed.

It was hard to see every detail from my living room. There were several trees, four yards, and the street between my house and Mrs. O'Shane's, but I saw Elizabeth go over to her and I think she spoke to her. What I could see was that after a moment Elizabeth took her by the arm and walked with her back to the front door. They talked briefly in the doorway, then Mrs. O'Shane went inside.

When Elizabeth stepped off the porch, the dogs parted again. I watched her walk up the street. As she passed my house the dogs, who had been watching her too, popped to their feet, turned in unison, and trotted away.

I rose early the next morning, dressed, ate a quick breakfast, and went

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next door to Elizabeth's determined to find out what was happening. Fluffy small dogs terrorizing Peterson had been one thing.

When she opened the door I couldn't help noticing how pale and drawn she looked, as if she were recovering from a long illness. Though she was as neat and well-groomed as ever, there were new lines at the corners of her mouth and I noticed as I sat at the kitchen table watching her make coffee that whenever she wasn't using them her fingers drummed constantly against the countertop.

After she had served me coffee, poured a cup of her own, and sat down at the table opposite me, I took a deep breath. "I want to know what's going on."

Elizabeth poured cream into her cup from a small rooster-shaped pitcher. "What do you think is going on?"

"Where are those dogs coming from?"

"Does it make a difference where they're from?"

I looked at her. Somehow, despite her finely etched features, her pale skin, her smoothly styled hair and manicured hands, she looked fierce, as if I had asked something unspeakably foolish. I sat up straighter. What was wrong with asking? What was wrong with wanting the neighborhood back to normal? "This can't go on. I mean, it really can't." I tried to sound calm, yet forceful when I spoke, the way we sometimes had to talk to stubborn, semi-lucid patients at the hospital. "I know it's not my place to speak for everyone, but, my god, Elizabeth, they almost attacked Mrs. O'Shane last night."

Elizabeth sank back against her chair. The sharp lines around the corners of her eyes seemed to fade a little. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but then something caught her eye over near the door and her jaw snapped shut. She rose, the motion so quick and sharp that the legs of the chair squeaked on the floor. She walked to the double window above the sink and looked across the back yard. "What I'm doing is something that should have been done a long time ago." She turned back to face me. "You can say he was just a dog. In fact, that's probably what you do say when you get together. Well, he *was* just a dog, but..." She hesitated and some of the anger seemed to go out of her. "He taught me everything good I know about love and courage and faithfulness. I don't care what anyone says. Things are out of balance here."

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I waited before I spoke. I could hear the second hand on the clock above the sink ticking. I could hear a branch from the overgrown hydrangea bush in the back yard scrape against the house. I tried to make my voice as gentle as possible because, well, you never know. "What about last night? What about Mrs. O'Shane? You never intended to hurt Mrs. O'Shane."

She came back across the room and sat at the table. The fierceness had faded and though she still looked determined, she seemed more like the old Elizabeth, bent on an intellectual exercise. "Yes, well, something happened." She reached into her shirt pocket and drew out the stone. As she talked, she tapped it on the table. "The tally stone doesn't care about right and wrong, you know. It cares about balance and it cares about strength. With enough strength, enough power, a new balance can be forced. I didn't think that strength would matter because Peterson wouldn't know, you see. He wouldn't realize what was happening and he wouldn't have the knowledge or ability to counterattack. Last night...well, I was wrong about Peterson."

"He did that?"

"Yes. But it won't happen again. He'll never use my dogs again."

I thought, how odd, that I take all this for granted. But then, there was the evidence night after night. "Isn't that what you do? Use them?"

She looked stricken. "I don't. I don't use them. I asked each of them if they would do it. They all wanted to. They've known Petersons. Some of them, all they ever knew all their lives were people like Peterson. People who hit them or bred them until they bled to death or threw them out car windows and crushed their skulls."

"They're dead? All of them are dead?"

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed slightly. "They're ghosts. I thought you knew that."

This time I was the one who rose and started pacing the kitchen. "I don't know anything. This isn't normal. Everything that's happened to me my whole life has been normal. Nothing odd has ever happened to me." I folded my arms across my chest and faced her. "Okay?"

"Okay. They're ghosts. The tally stone gives me that power — to call on ghosts if I want to. Or demons. Both sides of the balance sheet are there. Peterson could call on demons now. He could do anything. Now more than ever I have to finish it. Do you see?"

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"But," I said and I could feel a cold breeze against the back of my neck. "The dogs. I still don't see. What if they go after Mrs. O'Shane again? What if they go after someone else?"

Elizabeth sighed and I had the feeling she thought I was being dense again. Well, damn her anyway for bringing dead dogs into the neighborhood. Who asked her to make Peterson angry? "They won't do that again," she said.

"They did it last night," I snapped. "They went after Mrs. O'Shane pretty darn quick last night."

"They're dogs," Elizabeth said. "They're just...dogs. They don't reason the way that you or I do. They thought it was me directing them to Mrs. O'Shane's porch. Now they know better. They won't be fooled again. Don't you see that?"

I didn't answer. What was I going to say? Why yes, Elizabeth, now I see. It's all so clear now. I feel much better. Well, I didn't feel better. It was still odd and weird and scary. It wasn't normal.

"Helen," Elizabeth said after a short pause. "I'm sorry. I am. I'd stop it if I could. But it's gone too far now. I have to finish it." She rose and left the room. I could hear her footsteps as she climbed the stairs.

That night I invited the entire street — except Peterson, of course — to my house for dessert and coffee. I thought we might be safer together. I invited Elizabeth too, but I didn't really expect her to come.

Mrs. O'Shane said as she removed her scarf and navy blue coat in the entryway, "There are Dobermans out tonight. I saw them on the way over."

I had just settled Mrs. O'Shane in the living room when the doorbell rang again. It rang twice more in rapid succession as I hurried down the hall. I opened the door to the Horoshis, the last arrivals. They surged into the house. Once in the entryway, Kelli grabbed my arm and pointed. "Look," she said urgently.

"The Dobermans?" I peered into the thickening dusk. "Mrs. O'Shane already told me."

"No! No, look. There's something else out there." Out of the corner of my eye I could see Mr. Horoshi nodding. Mrs. Horoshi huddled against him, shivering. "See," Kelli insisted. "In the shadows, can you see them?"

I looked again, wishing I'd had my eyes checked last month when I

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was supposed to. Then I saw it. It wasn't really anything. It was shadow and darkness, but it moved. Independent of the wind, oblivious to the play of light from the streetlamps, it drifted down the street. I pulled Kelli all the way inside and slammed the door.

No one really wanted coffee and dessert, but I served it anyway. I had a fire in the fireplace — it really was a cold night that night — and it seemed natural to leave the lights off, light a few candles, and gather near the hearth. Gradually, people drifted, some to the bow window in the living room, some across the hall to the matching window in the dining room. Kelli pulled a chair over to the small corner window that pointed directly toward Peterson's house.

In Peterson's yard were all the little Bichons, sitting in the same two half-circles. They were so small; their backs as they sat facing away from us toward Peterson's front porch were so straight and determined. I could picture them on ships, standing in the bow, sailing blithely, even bravely, onto the open sea. Behind them like Roman sentinels were three rows of large black and tan Doberman Pinschers. The dog in the front row in the center was larger than all of them and looked so much like Seaboy that I almost gasped. Clustered by Mrs. O'Shane's porch and along Peterson's untrimmed privet hedge lurked the shadow things.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Peterson came outside. Even from this distance, I could see that he had a big stupid grin on his face as if he knew that he had spun the balance wheel a little bit harder, a little bit better than Elizabeth, as if it were all over already but the laughing.

The shadows moved forward, propelled by some means I couldn't detect. One minute they were by the hedge, the next they were halfway across the yard. The dogs shifted in their rows. The Dobermans all turned to face the shadows. The Bichons moved closer to the front steps; they never took their eyes away from Peterson and I thought perhaps he took a step toward the door. I realized that I'd been holding my breath and released it in a rush. What could those creatures, as creepy as they were, do to a dog that was already dead?

Right then, one of the shadow things touched the front leg of one of the Dobermans. The dog howled, not the lonely howl of a dog in a back yard at night, but a piercing shattering howl, like a scream. I heard Kelli Horoshi gasp. Where the shadow had touched, the skin, the muscle,

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everything, had flayed completely off the dog, leaving nothing but gleaming white bone behind. The shadow moved forward. The dog never hesitated. It screamed again, ran forward on its three good legs, and leaped into the center of the shadow. The shadow ripped backward into the hedge, shrank to nothing and disappeared.

After that things got blurry. The Horoshis and Mrs. O'Shane and the Donalds and I talked about it all the next day, but we never could agree on exactly what happened.

This is what I saw:

The shadow's disappearance caused things to freeze for several very long seconds. Peterson's grin seemed to fade. The Bichons looked at the Dobermans, who never stopped looking at the shadows. Except one, the large one that looked like Seaboy suddenly turned and looked intently up the street. I looked too.

Elizabeth had jumped off her porch and was running up the street toward Peterson's. We could see her standing on the sidewalk's edge shouting at him. He shouted back. He laughed at her, pointing at the shadow things, which had started to regroup near the porch. She pointed to the dogs and shook her head. Peterson laughed again. The shadows began to move toward the dogs again. The Dobermans stood, the hair up on the backs of their necks. Elizabeth stood very still. Peterson stopped laughing, watching her, suddenly wary. Elizabeth called the dogs to her. She held their heads, petted each of them and kissed them on the muzzle. Then she stepped in front of them and started toward the shadow things. Peterson started shouting at her, screaming it seemed to me with his hands gripping the rickety porch railing. He certainly wasn't laughing any longer.

Elizabeth continued across the lawn. When she was almost to the shadow things, she was joined by the large Doberman, the one that looked like Seaboy. He pushed his head underneath her hand. She stopped and looked down at him. She looked back at the other dogs, looked down at him again. She left her hand on his head and together they walked into the shadow things.

This time there wasn't any screaming. They walked in. They disappeared. And it was over. The shadow things were gone. The other dogs walked over to the place they'd been and sniffed the ground. Then, completely ignoring Peterson, they trotted down the street until they

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disappeared beyond the streetlights.

Kelli Horoshi came to my house early the next morning and said, "You'd better come see." I went outside with her to find Peterson carrying boxes out of his house and packing them into his car. Every once in a while he'd look back over his shoulder as if he was afraid something was after him. "Do you think he's really going?" Kelli whispered.

I said, "I think it will come whether he runs away or not."

"What?"

"A final tally."

She looked at me funny, then she left.

Later, I went and stood on the sidewalk in front of Peterson's house and looked at the spot where Elizabeth had walked into the shadow. She'd never hesitated. I don't think it mattered what happened, this time she was there. I stopped at her house. The lights were on in the hallway and the kitchen. I turned them off, locking the door as I left. Elizabeth didn't have any relatives; the mortgage was paid. Already it had the look of a house that no one lived in, a presence that would sit with us for a long time to come. I looked for the tally stone, but I couldn't find it anywhere.

Tuesday, I'm going down to the shelter and see if they have any of those fluffy little white dogs with the round faces. I've never been much of a dog person, but things change all the time.

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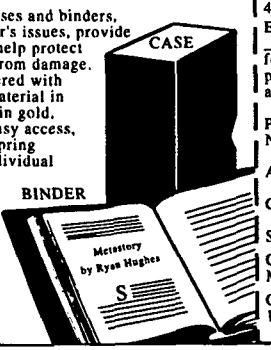

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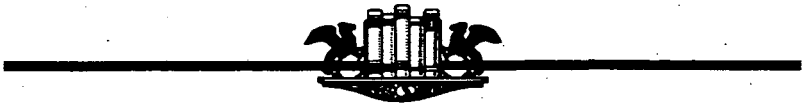

GUILTY PLEASURES

MICHELLE WEST

I WRITE THIS on the edge of the hectic and frenzied Christmas season. As usual, in the state of clutter that is generally called life (mine, anyway) everything is half-done — Christmas presents, cards, social plans. That the tree in our house is lit and decorated makes me believe in the miraculous nature of the holiday. Of course, at this time of year, the need for miracles probably outstrips the season's ability to grant them. I'm looking down that holiday tunnel to the dangerously close new year, and I'm trying not to count last year's failed resolutions — which is thankfully easier than it used to be, as I've grown more resigned and less prone to rashly make them.

Poised between the end of '96 and the start of '97, I look backward and forward, and I consider this particularly apt for the column.

This is the last Guilty Pleasures column that I'll write under the editorship of Kristine Kathryn Rusch. The next time you see her name mentioned in *this* column, it'll follow the title of a novel — one of the several that she's contributed, and will continue to contribute to the field, from the writers' trenches. She's certainly been writing all along, but it's understandable that, at *F&SF*, it's her role as editor that stands out.

I liked the editorials that prefaced this magazine for years. I didn't agree with all of them, but I liked the voice it gave to Kris's concerns, to the directions that she thought the industry was going in; those editorials always struck me as meticulously honest and direct, and they offered, at least to this reader, a clear map for the choices she made in the fiction mix that did represent her editorial vision.

When I first approached her with the idea for the column, I wasn't certain that she wouldn't dismiss it as too light or too trivial for the magazine. I discovered, later,

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that Kris probably reads literally more than any editor I've ever met — that she reads as a *reader*, and that she understands that no reader fixes on a single type of novel; she felt there was a place for *Guilty Pleasures*, and made one.

Magazines and book-lines are extensions of their editor's vision and taste. As are columns, and the way they evolve.

I look forward to the future of *F&SF* as 1997 rolls in, but I want to take this opportunity to state, clearly, that I'm very grateful that Kris Rusch gave me the opportunity to work with her during her tenure as editor. I'm looking forward to working with her books.

King's Dragon, Volume One of *Crown of Stars*, by Kate Elliott, DAW Books, 1997, $22.95.

This is Kate Elliott's first foray into fantasy. Better known for the novels of the Jaran — four books also published by DAW — she's brought that same sense of depth and breadth to a fantasy milieu of her creation.

The narrative is split between two viewpoint characters: A young woman named Liath and a young man named Alain, neither of noble birth, neither in control of the terrible corners their lives have turned.

Liath loses her father, and then her freedom to pay for the debts her father left behind; she is indentured to a man named Hugh — a man whom she's certain arranged her father's after-death penury in order to procure her, for reasons that she doesn't quite understand, and doesn't want to.

Alain is a young commoner, promised to the Church, who has a chance encounter — during a raid — with an otherworldly woman on horseback. In return for his vow of service, she says that she will spare his village, and he grants it willingly, binding himself to the Lady of Battles. The Church itself is destroyed by the raiding Eika, but the village is somehow mysteriously spared — and he finds evidence of a single shod rider and the blood of the invaders. He takes his first step along the path to a future that his life in the village has not prepared— could not prepare — him for.

Alain and Liath are about to be caught, like the individual threads upon a great loom, in a tapestry of war, of politics, as the King and his sister, the Duchess of Arconia, pit their armies and their vassals against each other in a contest for the throne. Sabella has a legitimate claim, and Henry, the king, the title

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through the birth of his illegitimate son, Sanglant, the leader of the King's Dragons, and the King's Dragon of the title — but there are magics and treacheries in abundance as the course of the war unfolds.

In fact, there's enough going on that a plot synopsis must say too little; to say enough is to run half the length of the magazine. Elliott's strength is in her ability to create not only a real world, but a sense of milieu, of the not-quite-here, that imbues her characters with roots and grounding in a culture that is mediaeval in more than superficial trappings. Because the world is that real, the characters are real, and the stories of Alain and Liath are accessible, thoughtful, compelling.

Notable and noteworthy high fantasy. I recommend it.

Bloody Bones, by Laurell K. Hamilton, Ace Books, 1996, $5.99.

You have to love a book that starts with the line "It was St. Patrick's Day, and the only green I was wearing was a button that read, 'Pinch me and you're dead meat.'" Well, I do. Once again Hamilton offers a self-contained novel — the fifth in what one hopes is a continuing series — written entirely in the first-person voice of the irrepressible Anita Blake, Vampire Executioner, Necromancer without parallel, and general all-around tough guy — if you don't count her circuitous love life. The plot twists are contrived — but they're the type of contrivance that you generally notice *after* the ride, not during it, and if one of her characters presses on in a particularly suicidal fashion, you smack your forehead in frustration, just the way you would at a friend.

Bloody Bones is the name of a tavern. It's the name of a monster. It's the serial killer that Anita Blake is on the trail of in the middle of a small town America where monsters not only live, but also work, have rights, and rule. She's got Larry with her, of course, and he's still the bright-eyed young assistant, but the brightness in his eyes might be dimming a tad in the light of multiple murders, deaths that neither he nor Anita have been able to stop. There are vampires on the loose, and they're a bit too big for Anita. When she calls Jean-Claude for information, she gets more than she bargained for — which is to say, she gets him. Richard, the werewolf boyfriend, is safely ensconced at home for the duration of this one.

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Mayhem, madness, old spells, and older vampires. And Anita Blake at the center of it all, struggling to stay on top, stay alive. Hamilton through and through.

There's the requisite high body count — big surprise — and you wouldn't think anything with that high a body count could be light reading, but this is the perfect rushing-through-holiday-hell type of stopover, something that demands reaction, even demands to be liked, without demanding the work you're probably too exhausted for.

Here There Be Angels by Jane Yolen, illustrations by David Wilgus, Harcourt Brace, 1996, $18.

Let me say up front that I do not know everything about Angels; that I, in fact, know almost nothing about them, their history, and their significance. I know the archangels, but I really don't know the rest of the canon, so I came to this book without that specialist obsession.

And I loved it.

In particular, I found the story "The Boy Who Had Wings" noteworthy and disturbing. In Yolen's introduction she explains that in some ways it's a parable for her life, which says a lot. Young Aetos is a blessed boy, a boy who is born with a difference that marks him: He has wings. Wondrous wings. And he is born to a horse herder and his wife in a village that has no use for wings, for flight; born to a man and a woman who feel that the difference in *his* birth marks *them*. Of course those wings come into play, and of course they serve a function both of beauty, freedom and strength — but this isn't a story in which a boy finds himself and goes on into the wider world; it has, at its base, a more human reality: the desire for community, for acceptance, for belonging.

This is not a ninety-three page story; it's a collection of short stories, folk-tales, legends and poetry, with lovely black and white illustrations, that manage to be charming, chilling, hopeful by turn, always heartfelt, and never twee. Many of these have been published before (one in the pages of this magazine in the '70s) but most in venues that genre readers won't have seen, which is a pity; the book is aimed at a younger readers market, but it really is an all-age collection.

A Fury Scorned, by Pamela Sargent and George Zebrowski, Pocket Books, 1996, $5.99.

The strongest *Trek* episodes have always been — for me — those

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episodes which deal with fundamental human crisis on a level that we philosophize about, but would never otherwise encounter in our day-to-day life. The Organian episode in classic *Trek*, for instance. "Measure of Man" in the *Next Generation* run.

Sargent and Zebrowski follow that tradition in *A Fury Scorned*. The *Enterprise* is sent on an emergency mission — a mission that is, by its nature, impossible, even in the eyes of the Federation that has ordered them to Epictetus III.

Epictetus III's sun is about to go nova; they have perhaps a week, perhaps a bit more — or less — before the planets surrounding the unstable sun are destroyed. The population of Epictetus III is a paltry twenty million, less even than the population of Canada, and it exists completely without hope until Picard is forced to offer "something" to the natives of the desperate planet. The most he can offer them is this: Choose three thousand of your people, and some of your greatest cultural artifacts, and we'll take them with us to safety before the planet is destroyed.

Because it's a *Trek* novel, and because the *Enterprise* has Data, another alternative — using the technology of a long-gone civilization that once inhabited Epictetus III — is suggested, but Sargent and Zebrowski have managed, in this novel, to make the sense of possible victory costly, and therefore more real, than many such victories often are. Because there's no guarantee whatsoever that Data's proposed solution *is* in fact a solution, the Federation forbids the *Enterprise* from revealing the plan at all; if it fails, the planet and the *Enterprise* are doomed, and the Federation does not want to be seen — for political reasons, possibly good ones — as responsible for the failure of the plan because it doesn't want the promise of salvation to be followed by failure; it could be construed, by panicked colonies, as Starfleet's attempt to lie its way out of a dangerous situation. And yet, without hope, the world suffers.

In panic, a number of the colonists have fled the planet on sublight crafts — chosen largely because of their relationships with some members of the governing body of Epictetus III. Many people have chosen to commit suicide. One of the crew members of the *Enterprise* is a native of the planet, with parents and a younger sibling whom she can't lift a finger to save, and there is a very real danger that the

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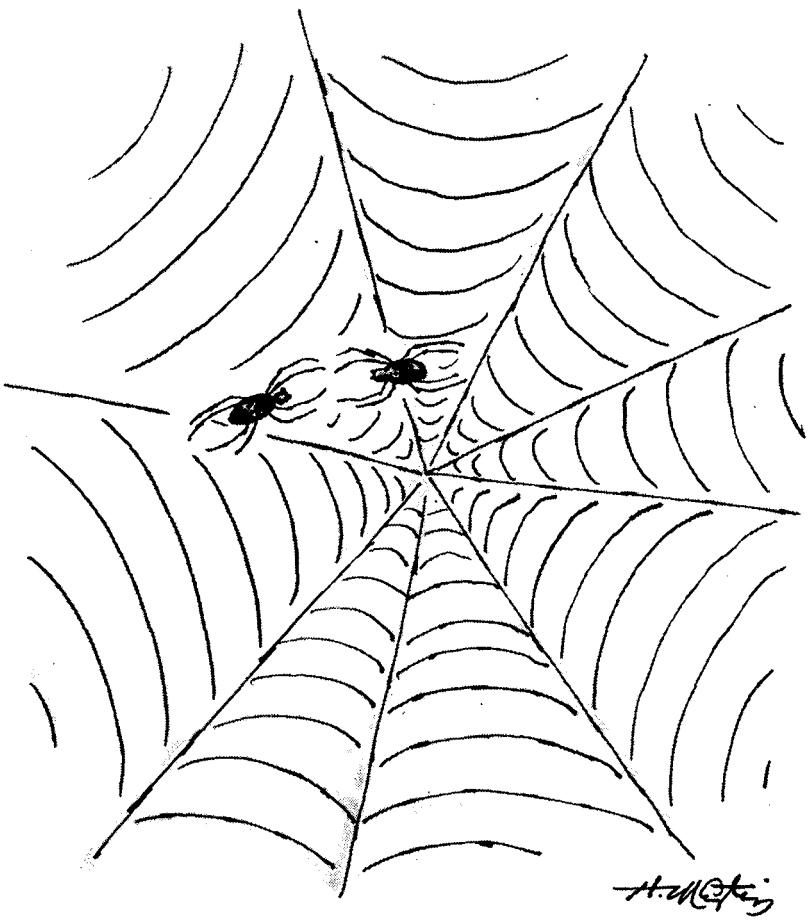
Enterprise crew members themselves face attack by people who are desperate to board the *Enterprise* and survive. There's a sense of consequence that makes compelling reading.

This is a *Star Trek* novel, and it's one of the good ones. Better, in my opinion than a lot of the episodes.



"I hope you'll join us next Saturday to celebrate our hooking up with the World Wide Web."

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Alan Brennert is one of our favorite writers. (And if you missed the reasons why, I suggest you pick up the April 1996 issue, which contains his story, "The Refuge.") He writes very little short fiction, but when he does get around to a short story, it receives both attention and acclaim. He has won a Nebula award and an Emmy, and now that he's turned his attention to feature films, we may watch him collect an Oscar one day.

Whatever he chooses to do, we hope he still finds time to produce gems like "Echoes."

Echoes

By Alan Brennert

EVEN NOW, I CAN'T BRING myself to blame my parents. They had their reasons; they carried scars from their own childhoods. My father's father was a manic-depressive, his mood swings legendary, the household perpetually caught between the thunder of his passions and the gray spaces of his despair. My father, when he married, longed for a house filled with music and a little girl's laughter; and naturally he wanted to ensure that his daughter didn't inherit her grandfather's affliction. Back in the eighties, when my father was growing up, they hadn't yet mapped the gene that causes bipolar disorder, much less figured out how to mask it; if only it had stopped at that. My mother, for her part, had had an idyllic childhood, perhaps too much so: something of a musical prodigy, she had spent fifteen happy years in violin recitals, only to discover that youthful virtuosity doesn't necessarily mature into adult genius. Having bitterly learned the limits of her own talent, she was determined that her daughter would know no limits.

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And so I was conceived — an appropriate term, I think, since I (and thousands like me) began more as a concept than a person, a set of parameters later realized in flesh. We were an affluent family with a home in Reston, a tony suburb in northern Virginia, but even for an affluent couple gene enhancement is not a cheap proposition, and I was to have no brothers or sisters. But my parents got their money's worth. By the age of four — as soon as I had the necessary hand strength for the piano — I was picking out complex melodies I'd heard on the radio. I had, have, an eidetic memory, and as soon as I learned to read music, I discovered I could sight-read virtually anything that was put in front of me — taking in a page at a glance, then playing it effortlessly. Eighty percent of so-called musical genius is just this facility to sight-read, a lucky fluke of memory; but of course in my case, luck played no part in it.

The other twenty percent is technique, and I had that as well. By the age of seven I was playing Bach, the piece he'd written for his own daughter, the *Anna Magdalena Notebook*; by eight, his *Two-Part Inventions*; by nine, I had mastered the more challenging parts of Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*. I kept a busy schedule: music lessons twice a week, two hours of practice each day, the occasional student recital, a normal load of schoolwork. But I enjoyed it, I truly did. I loved music; loved making music. Of course it's true that I was quite literally born to love it, shaped not just genetically but by early exposure to music, the "hard wiring" of my sensory cortex that locked in my musical skills; at times I wonder if my passion is less real for that, but the sweet melancholy that grips me as I play the Adagio from Marcello's *Concerto in D minor*, the serenity I feel when performing Debussy's *Image*, these are real emotions, regardless of whether genetic conduits were laid to channel them.

Who knows? Perhaps even the degree of my obsession with music was predetermined, manipulated. That might explain my single-minded attention to it in my earliest years (when I most needed such single-mindedness), forsaking the company of other children my age; I was almost twelve before I had the first hint of something missing from my life, and by then it was a little late to acquire the social skills others had learned as a matter of course. I had a few acquaintances at school, I was no pariah, but playmates? Not really. Confidants? Hardly. At three o'clock each afternoon, as my classmates scattered to local playgrounds or

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shopping malls, I was somehow left behind, like a stone in the heart of a leaf storm, too heavy to take flight. I wandered home to practice, or speed-read novels in the woods near Lake Audubon, taking in pages as though I were drawing breaths, with no more real understanding of the life I was reading about than my lungs understood the oxygen they took in.

On one such afternoon, autumn light waning around me, I lay on my stomach on a fan of oak leaves, reading a book and listening to Rachmaninoff on my laser chip, when I heard a boy's voice behind me say, "Hi."

Startled, I sat up and turned around. There was a boy, about my age, sitting up against the thick trunk of a maple tree, big floppy sketch pad — orange cover, cream-colored pages — propped up on his knees. Like me, he had fair skin and dark hair, but he was about half a head taller than I. There was something vaguely familiar about him; I wondered if I hadn't seen him in school.

"Hi," I said. I hadn't heard him approach, and I was sure he hadn't been sitting there when I lay down, ten minutes before. But I was so pleased to be talking to someone — that someone was talking to *me* — that I didn't give it a further thought.

He smiled, a friendly enough smile. "My name's Robert."

I might have been lonely, but I was still shy; I took a cautious step toward him. "I'm Katherine. Kathy."

"You live around here?"

I nodded. "On Howland Drive."

"Yeah?" His eyes brightened. "Me too."

So that was it. I must have seen him on our street. Feeling a little less reticent, I nodded toward his sketch pad. "Can I see?"

"Sure." He angled the pad so I could get a better look, as I sat down beside him. The top page was a lovely pencil sketch of the surrounding woods, exhibiting (I can say today) a very sophisticated understanding of perspective, light, shadow.

But being twelve years old and knowing nothing of any of this, all I said was, "Wow."

That was enough. He beamed. "Thanks," he said. He flipped through the book, showing me other sketches, some still-lifes, a few portraits, all of them excellent.

"Do you go to school for this?" I asked.

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"I take lessons."

"Me too." I added, "Piano."

"Yeah? Cool."

He flipped to a portrait of a girl with blonde hair and big eyes, and I let out a little yelp of recognition. "Cindy Lennox!" I cried out. "You know Cindy, too?"

"Yeah, sure, I go to school with her."

He flipped past Cindy's portrait to a fresh piece of paper, began absently sketching as he talked. "I'm getting a paint-box for Christmas," he announced, "half the size of this pad, with its own hard drive, oil and watercolor templates...man, the stuff you can do with one of those, it's incredible!"

Not to be outdone, I said, "I'm getting a new orchestral sequencing program for my MusicMaster. I'll be able to add up to fifteen different voices — strings, horns, keyboard — "

He looked up from his sketch and smiled, as though something had just occurred to him. "You're one too, aren't you?" he said.

"One what?"

His smile took on a secret edge. "You know. When the doctors do something to you, before you're even born?"

Suddenly I felt afraid. I knew exactly what he meant, of course; it was all over the media, there was even a website about it on the Schoolnet. Some parents even took their kids on TV and talked about it; but most, like mine, kept quiet, fearing that their children would be discriminated against, excluded from scholastic or talent competition (though this was technically illegal) with non-enhanced kids.

I knew what I was, but had sworn to my parents I'd never talk to *anyone* about it. So reflexively I shot back, "Not me."

"Yeah, sure." He sounded unconvinced, and I must admit, the idea of actually meeting someone else like myself thrilled as well as frightened me.

So without admitting anything about myself, I said, "So you're one?"

He nodded, switching pencil colors, continuing to sketch. "My folks'd kill me if they heard, but I don't care. I'm not ashamed of it." He looked up; gave me a little smile. "Are you?"

This was getting dangerous. I stood up quickly. "I — I've gotta go."

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"Don't you want to see your picture?"

"My what?"

He turned the pad around, showing me its face: my face. A rough outline, without much detail, only two colors (dark gray and light blue), but a really good likeness. My dark hair, cut in a short pageboy; my lips, which always seemed to me too thin, pursed in a shy little half-smile; my eyes, the irises a light blue, so light my father once told me he could see the sky in them...

"That's really good," I said, impressed. "Can I — "

I looked up at him...and my breath caught in my chest.

"What is it?" he said, sensing my distress. I didn't answer. I was looking in his eyes — the irises a light blue; very light. He said something else, and I didn't really hear it; I was watching his lips as he spoke...

"Kathy?" I finally heard him say. "What is it, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lied. But inside I felt strange, as though I had discovered something I shouldn't have — like turning over a rock and finding nightcrawlers underneath. Something similar squirmed inside me when I looked at Robert. I told him I had to go home and practice my piano; he seemed disappointed, started to get up, but I was well on my way before he could suggest walking back together.

Later, playing alone on the swing set in my backyard, I realized I had turned my back on someone who might've become my first real friend, and the rush of the wind blew my tears back into my eyes, and I thought I would drown in my own regret.

I DIDN'T DARE TELL my parents about Robert, of course — I was afraid they wouldn't believe that I hadn't actually told him anything about myself. I kept a cautious eye out for him at school, but never caught so much as a glimpse of him, which I thought strange, considering the size of the school. Finally, consumed by equal parts anxiety and need, I went up to Cindy Lennox one day in the cafeteria and said, "I met a friend of yours the other day. He said his name was Robert."

She looked blank. "Who?"

"Well I don't know his last name, but he did a sketch of you. He's an artist?"

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She just shook her head. "I don't know any artists named Robert."

I felt like an idiot. I stammered out something, *guess I'm mistaken sorry bye*, and quickly got out of there. I resolved to forget about Robert entirely; he gave me the creeps, why did I even care who he was?

I went home, my mother took me to my Thursday session with my piano instructor, Professor Laangan, and I gladly lost myself in Chopin and Bach for the next hour. When I got home I banged out of the house, into the backyard, intending to play on the swing set until dinnertime —

But there was someone already on the swing.

Not Robert; a girl. I stopped short. Her back was to me; all I saw was a dark brown ponytail bobbing behind her as she swung.

On *my* swing. In *my* backyard!

"Excuse me?" I said. That startled her. She jumped off; turned around to face me, hands indignantly on hips.

"What are you doing in my yard?" she demanded.

As before, I couldn't answer. I was so stunned, I couldn't even speak.

I was staring...at myself.

Me but not-me: her hair longer, ponytail arcing like a whip behind her, and though her features were identical to mine, I was seeing them configured in a way I never had before — thin lips twisted in a sneer, sky-blue eyes flashing with annoyance, head cocked at a haughty little angle. "*Well?*" she said petulantly.

Finally I found my voice, even if it did crack a little: "This — this is *my* yard."

She took a few steps toward me, hands still on her hips, a certain swagger in her walk. "Oh, is it now?"

I stepped back, a reflex. She smiled, sensing that she had the advantage. "Look," she said slowly, "you're obviously not very bright, so it *really* wouldn't be fair of me, with a 200 I.Q., to take advantage, but...oh, what the heck. This is your yard, so, ipso facto, *you* must be...Katherine Brannon?"

I couldn't stop staring at her. It was like looking into a mirror, but having your reflection suddenly start mouthing off at you. I was silent long enough that she said, "*Hello*? Can you at least pre*tend* to some intelligence? Especially if you're trying to impersonate the winner of the Fairfax County Scholastic — "

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I didn't care what she'd won; I'd had enough of this little brat. "I *live* here!" I shouted suddenly, and was pleased to see her flinch. "I don't care who *you* think you are, this is *my* house!"

Those crystal blue eyes, my eyes, were transparent with hatred. "We'll just see about that," she said coldly, then turned on her heel — and ran toward the house. I'd left the back door open; she ran through it and out of sight. I raced in after her, through the kitchen and into the living room, where my father was just sitting down to watch the news.

"Where *is* she?" I yelled, breathless. He blinked.

"Where is who? And why are you yelling, young lady?"

"The girl! The one who ran in! The one with — " I almost said, *The one with my face*, but wisely didn't take it that far.

"The only girl running in here," my mother said, coming up behind me, "is you."

It was true. I searched my bedroom, the family room, even the kitchen again; the girl was gone. Shaken, pressed by my parents for answers, I told them I was just pretending; made it seem as though I were chasing an imaginary playmate. And as I lay in bed that night, I almost convinced myself of the same thing; that my imagination — and loneliness — had conjured up my strange nemesis. I went to school resolved to try and overcome my shyness, to make more friends somehow — to find the time, between lessons and practice, to do the normal things other girls did.

In the cafeteria at lunchtime, I noticed a new girl with long, silky blonde hair sitting alone at a table, eating her macaroni and cheese. Screwing up my nerve, I marched right over and introduced myself.

"Hi," I said. "You're new, aren't you?"

The girl shook aside her long shock of hair, looked up, and smiled at me.

"Yes," she said, shyly pleased, "I just transferred over from public."

And once again, I was looking into my own eyes.

Involuntarily I cried out, a yelp of shock and fear. This instantly made me the focus of all attention in the cafeteria, which distracted me just long enough to look away from the blonde girl, the blonde *me*, for a moment...and when I looked back, she was gone.

I spent the rest of the lunch hour feeling the eyes of my classmates on me, like sunlight focused through a magnifying glass; their whispers, their

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little sniggers, were even worse, each a tiny dagger in my back. When the bell rang, I greeted it as a deliverance; but what it delivered me into turned out to be far worse.

During math period a male version of me — not Robert but another boy with my eyes, lips, nose — looked up periodically from his desk, rattled off the solution to an equation as though he had a calculator in his head, then went back to scribbling on an electronic notepad. No one else seemed to notice him, and I kept silent, biting my lip, my hands trembling the whole hour.

In English I glanced up from my own notescreen to find the blonde Kathy (she signed it *Kathi*) standing before the class, reciting an essay — even as my teacher, Mrs. McKinnon, simultaneously lectured us on the proper use of participles. I sat there, the two voices clashing in my head — trying to drown them out with my thoughts, a memory of the bombastic third movement of Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* — praying for the blonde me to shut up and sit down...

In gym class a taller, lither version of myself straddled the parallel bars like a budding Olympian gymnast; she swung her perfectly proportioned legs up, up, up, balanced herself for several moments in a perfect handstand, then swung down and vaulted off the bars. And watching her amazing balance, her strength, her grace, I felt the first shameful pang of what was to become a familiar envy...

By the end of the day, as I hurried out of the building, they were everywhere: the bratty Katherine (Katja, she called herself) was holding court by the stairwell, her mocking laugh at someone's expense echoing through the corridor; in the music room one version of me played the violin, as another practiced the flute; in shop class Robert was making a wooden horse from soft balsa, touching the edge of its mane to a spinning lathe.

I hurried home, but to my horror they were all following me, a procession of Katherines, male and female, tall and short, dark and blonde and everything in between — all laughing or talking, bouncing balls or hefting schoolbooks, a phantom regiment haunting my every step. I ran the last several blocks, ran into the imagined safety of my home, crying "*Mommy*! *Daddy*!" but this was no refuge either: as I burst into the living room I heard a voice, *my* voice, raised in song, saw myself standing by the

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piano, practicing the scales with a perfect pitch I didn't possess; saw too a red-haired Kathy with sculpted nose, green eyes, and full lips, talking endlessly on the phone; saw a tomboy Kathy bang in in torn jeans and T-shirt, yelling for Mom —

It took me a moment to realize that I was screaming *Shut up! Shut up! SHUT UP!* at the top of my voice, shouting *Mommy! Daddy! Make them go AWAY*, and as I fell sobbing to the floor I saw my mother, her face ashen, stumbling as she rushed toward me — and then she was holding me, rocking me, and for one terrible moment I wasn't even sure, I didn't *know*, which one of us she really held...

THE HOSPITAL CAME as a relief. I didn't know why at the time, but the number of other Katherines dwindled from dozens to a handful, and the more radically different ones — boys; blondes; gymnasts — didn't appear at all. The ones that did appear (and that was the correct word: as I lay in bed, staring into space, I saw them walk into the room as through a fold in the air, then exit, minutes or hours later, in the same way) all looked pretty much like me, and all looked just about as screwed up, as well. One sat in a corner and cried for what seemed hours on end; one angrily pounded her fists on the door and screamed obscenities; another tore a small piece of loose metal from the bed frame, entered the toilet, and never came out — I stayed out of the bathroom for hours, my bladder bursting, terrified at what I might find in there.

Seeing these terrible alternatives, ironically enough, was the best thing for me: determined not to end up like any of them, I didn't let my fear turn to panic, or hysteria. I stayed calm when the doctors asked me questions, I told them everything I'd seen and continued to see; they responded gravely and not, oddly enough, condescendingly. Almost all doctors treat children as though they're not merely young but retarded as well; yet here were a bunch of adults soberly asking me questions as if I too were an adult: "What were the differences, physically, between the boy you met in the woods and the boy in math class?" "Did all of the other Katherines call themselves that, or did they use other names?"

Their matter-of-factness helped to keep me calm; even encouraged me, when they asked if I was seeing anyone at the moment, to shrug and

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say, "Oh, sure. There's one sitting in the corner right now." And I'd swear I saw one of them glance, ever so slightly, into the corner of the room, then quickly back again.

Each of my parents blamed the other for what had happened: my father accused my mother of working me into a state of nervous exhaustion, and my mother, hurt, shot back that there was no mental illness on *her* side of the family. I heard all this late one night when they thought I was asleep; heard also my father's wounded silence, pregnant with guilt and fear that perhaps his father's legacy hadn't been extinguished, after all.

But as it turned out there was more than enough guilt to pass around. When the doctors finished their examination and sat down to talk to my parents (though I didn't learn this until years later) their first question was, "Is she gene-enhanced?" Apparently this sort of "psychotic break," as they called it, was not uncommon among the genetically enhanced — one in every ten children suffered under some similar kind of delusional system, the onset usually just before puberty. They didn't know why; all they could do was study the pathology and hope to understand it. The good news was, most children, with therapy, could learn to distinguish between reality and delusion. Would my parents agree to place me in outpatient therapy, as part of a study group?

Of course they agreed. The choices they'd made for me, for my life, now came back to haunt them; and where once they had dreamed for me a life far above normal, now they prayed it would be merely, blessedly, normal.

My favorite of the doctors was Dr. Carroll, a prematurely gray woman in her late thirties; she came after the first round of interrogators, and immediately endeared herself to me by bringing me a set of flowered barrettes for my hair. "They're my daughter's," she said, "but I thought you might appreciate them more, just now, and she was happy to let you have them." I was wearing drab green hospital gowns most of the time; the pink and purple barrettes were a welcome reminder of the outside world, and I beamed as I slipped them into my hair.

"Thanks," I said, adding, "How old is your daughter?"

"A little older than you — about thirteen." She looked at my reflection in the small vanity mirror and smiled. "You look very pretty."

I automatically shook my head. "Not me. I'm not pretty."

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"I think you are. Why don't you?"

Dr. Carroll's talent for making therapy seem like gentle conversation put me at my ease, and her calm attitude toward my starkest fears made those fears seem somehow surmountable. At first we talked only about music, and school, and all the normal self-image problems any girl my age would have; it wasn't until our fifth session together that she asked me if I saw any other Katherines in the room just then.

I glanced over at the window, where the Screamer, as I called her, was pounding on the thick leaded glass, shouting "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" over and over. I told this to Dr. Carroll (though I didn't repeat the F-word), wondering if she believed me.

She nodded, but instead of pursuing it she looked at me very seriously and said, "You're a very special young lady, Katherine. You know all about that, don't you?"

I hesitated, not admitting anything, but she went on as though I had:

"Well, sometimes special people see special things. Things other people don't see. That doesn't mean those things aren't real. It doesn't mean that you're wrong, or crazy, for seeing them."

It was the first time anyone had used the word *crazy* to my face, though not the first time it had occurred to me. Tears sprang to my eyes. "I'm not?" I said in a small, unbearably hopeful voice.

She shook her head. "I can't tell you these things you see will ever go away. But I can help you to live with them."

"But who *are* they?" I asked, desperate for answers. "Where do they *come* from?"

She paused. "We're not sure yet. We have some ideas, but we can't talk about them to your parents because that's all they are right now, just ideas. But..." She put a fingertip, lightly, to my lips; smiled. "Can you keep a secret, Kathy? Our secret, yours and mine. Not for your mom or dad, or your best friend, or anyone?"

I nodded eagerly.

"You're a little too young to understand it all," she said, "but think of them as...echoes. Like when you call out in the woods, and hear your own voice bounce back at you? That's all they are. And they can't hurt you."

"Are they real?"

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"Not in the way you are," she said. "How can I — ?" She stopped, thought a moment, then smiled. "Hold out your left hand," she instructed.

I held out my left hand. "Keep it there," she said. "Now. Look around. Do you see any other echoes?"

I looked around the room. The Screamer was still there, of course, and the sobbing girl, and...

I gasped.

Sitting next to me on the bed was another echo — a perfect echo, in fact, dressed just like me, the flowered barrettes in exactly the same places, identical in appearance, except...she was holding out her *right* hand.

"What do you see?" the doctor asked. I told her. When I turned back, the echo was gone.

And I began to understand, however vaguely, what the echoes truly were...

I went home about two weeks later, and though the number of echoes increased when I did, they no longer terrified me the way they had; with Dr. Carroll's help — mainly concentration techniques — I was able to reduce them to the level of background noise, like a television set accidentally left on. And I began noticing other things about them: how some echoes looked as real, as three-dimensional as I did; how others seemed curiously flat, like watercolors painted on the air; how still others were vague, hazily defined, flickering in and out of existence as though their purchase on reality was tenuous at best. As the years passed and my vocabulary increased, my ability to describe what I saw increased with it — and I dutifully reported everything to Dr. Carroll.

I returned to school, but found that my absence had only made things worse for me there; word had gotten out that I'd checked into a hospital, and though "nervous exhaustion" may be relatively value-neutral for adults, for children it is one more way to set someone apart. My classmates — some of them — would call out to me in the hallway, "Hey, Nervous!" Or, "Hey, Nervie!" If I objected, got angry, they just made a bigger deal of it: "Hey, Nervie, take it easy! Don't wanna go back to the bughouse!" All I could do was ignore them as best I could; if I could ignore the echoes, I told myself, I could ignore anything.

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But even the classmates who didn't actively torment me shied away from me, and my loneliness went from tolerable to profound. I didn't mention it to my parents on the reasonable and usually accurate assumption that parents only made things like this worse; I stuck it out until I moved on into high school, where I thought I could melt unobtrusively into a larger student body, and where — amid the normal quotient of violence, drugs, and gangs — I hoped a week in a mental hospital was hardly worth mentioning. But there were still those who remembered, still those who took delight in harassing me; my only solace was my music, and my only friend, Doctor Carroll.

Most if not all of my echoes made the transition to high school with me; but the majority, luckily, seemed to take no notice of me — they walked, talked, laughed, and moved like images on a movie screen that just happened to be the world. A few, like Robert, continued to interact with me occasionally. Sometimes they would try to do this in the middle of a class, and I had to do my best to not react, to keep my expression stony. They never seemed to appear during my piano lessons with Professor Laangan, and I finally realized why: there was only one piano in my instructor's home, and while I was sitting at it, I couldn't see any of the echoes who were doubtless occupying that same space. On occasion, however, I heard snatches of melody, other hands fingering other keys in some other reality: some not as well as I, some just as well, and some, to my great annoyance, better than I.

On rare occasions, an echo found me alone, as on one overcast day in March, as I walked home from school to find a smiling Robert pacing me, paint-box tucked under one arm.

"Hi," he said. I looked around. There was no one else on the street; it didn't much matter if I answered him or not. Perhaps it was a mark of my loneliness that I *wanted* to answer him.

"Hi," I said. Like me, Robert was entering puberty, but unlike me, it seemed to agree with him. I was a slow starter, short and flat where my classmates were growing taller and rounder. Robert was going through a normal growth spurt, filling out, becoming more muscular; his voice was deeper too. More and more I felt uncomfortable around him, uncomfortable with the feelings he evoked in me. But I tried to be friendly; I smiled.

"See you got that paint-box for Christmas," I said.

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"Yeah, it's great. You get that sequencing program you wanted?"

It had been so long I'd almost forgotten. I nodded. We walked in silence a long moment, then he said, quietly, "I wish we could be together."

I felt suddenly anxious. "I...don't think that's possible," I said, picking up my pace just a little.

He thought a moment, then nodded sadly. "Yeah. I guess not," he said. Then he shrugged.

Something occurred to me, then. "Do you...see them?" I asked. "The others?"

He looked at me with puzzlement. "'Others'?"

No; clearly, he didn't. "Never mind," I said. "Well. See you."

I started to veer off the path we'd been sharing — but he reached out, as though to take my hand! I'm sure he couldn't, not really, but I never found out; I flinched, pulled back my hand before he made — or didn't make — contact.

He looked hurt. "Do you have to go?"

Something in his eyes, his tone, disturbed me. Suddenly this felt wrong; unnatural.

"I — I'm sorry," I said, turning. I hurried off down the street; he didn't follow, but stood staring after me for what seemed the longest time. I kept walking, head down, and when I finally looked back, he was no longer there, as though the wind itself had taken him.

"Why can they see *me*, but not each other?"

By now most of my sessions with Doctor Carroll resembled physics lessons more than psychotherapy; we would sit in her office and discuss all the books she'd given me, the ones comprehensible to a teenager, and she could now give more sophisticated answers to my questions than she could a few years ago.

"Because you're the observer," she explained. "They're just...probability wave functions. You're real; they just have the *potential* to be real." She thought a moment, then added, "Actually, some of them *can* see each other — the ones in your hospital room, the ones who 'split off' from you fairly recently."

"Robert seems awfully real for someone who isn't."

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She got up, poured herself a cup of coffee. "Well, some of the echoes had more potential to be real than others. Obviously, at some point your parents seriously considered having a boy, as well as genetically enhancing his artistic skills. The more chance that that 'you' might actually have been born, the more real their echo seems to you."

I shook my head. "I've read all this stuff," I said, "and it seems to me like everybody should have these echoes."

"We probably do," she allowed. "For all we know everyone on Earth may be a nexus of an infinite number of probability lines, with the more likely waves creating artifacts — echoes. More today, maybe, than ever before, with the advent of genetic engineering. Thirty years ago, there were only a limited number of combinations possible from a normal conception; now there are billions."

"So why can *I* see mine, but you can't see yours?"

She sat down at her desk again and sighed.

"Sometimes," she said with a smile, "I think we have as many theories as you have echoes. Köhler draws an interesting analogy. Zygotes grow by cellular proliferation — one cell becoming two, two becoming four — and differentiation, that is, some cells become muscle, some nerve, et cetera. Probability waves, the theory goes, proliferate in much the same way — one wave splitting in two, the second differentiating from the first on a quantum level, creating various quantum 'ghosts.' Perhaps you remember the quantum split in the same way the body remembers things on a cellular level. Perhaps the process of enhancement creates some structural change in the brain that enables you to see the echoes."

"In other words," I said, "you don't know."

She shrugged. "We know more than we did when you first came here, but that's only been a few years. Chances are it will be another generation before we have enough — forgive me — enough autopsies to collect a decent amount of data."

I envisioned my body lying inert on a laboratory table, my skull split open like a coconut, scientists studying the ridges of my brain like tea readers. The image stayed with me for days. Sometimes the worst part of my "ability" was that it reminded me too clearly, too consistently, of my origins. My musical talent was all I had, I clung to it desperately, but at times I had to wonder how special, how real, was a talent that had been

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so carefully graphed, mapped, plotted. I tried not to dwell on it, but it was hard not to; hard to fight off the depressions which took periodic hold of me. And they often came at the worst times.

In March of my senior year my parents, Professor Laangan, and I took the train to New York City, where I auditioned for the Juilliard School. My audition pieces, I had decided, would be Chopin's *Étude in E major*, a prelude and fugue from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Elliott Carter's *Piano Sonata*, and my longtime favorite, Alessandro Marcello's *Concerto in D minor*. The Marcello, originally written for oboe and orchestra, I would play in a reduction for piano, but I needed someone to perform the orchestral part of the score (Juilliard had only recently allowed the use of concerti at auditions, but still didn't permit computerized accompaniment), and Professor Laangan had graciously agreed to do so at a second piano. As the train hurtled closer to New York I felt thrilled, energized, terrified — all normal things to be feeling, to be sure. But as I walked into the classroom and faced the panel of three Juilliard instructors, my insecurities surged up inside me. I imagined that they were all looking at me as though they *knew*, as though I bore some stigmata instantly identifying me as a fraud, a genetic cheat (though I told myself that I could hardly be unique in that, here at Juilliard). At the piano I hesitated a long moment, trying to stave off my self-consciousness and fear, unable to look the faculty panel in the eye...until Professor Laangan prompted me by clearing his throat, and, unable to put it off any longer, I took a deep breath and launched into the *Étude*. As soon as I began playing, thank God, my fears vanished. I was no longer a gene freak, I was no longer even Kathy Brannon, I was the instrument of this music, the medium through which it came to life two centuries after it was written, and that was enough.

After Chopin came Bach, and after Bach, the complex counterpoint of Carter's *Sonata*; and then Professor Laangan took his place at a second piano, and together we began the concerto. I had played the others well enough, I knew, but this piece was different; this I felt deeply, and as I played, I understood for the first time why it held such special attraction for me. As I played the first movement, the Andante with its sweep and eloquence, its sometimes breathless pace, it seemed to represent all the promise and impatience of youth — my promise, the promise that my parents had instilled in me. I segued into the second movement, that sense

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of bright expectation replaced by the slow, haunting strains of the Adagio, at once lyrical and sad — mirroring the turns my own life had taken, the shifting harmonies sounding to me like the raised voices of ghosts, of echoes. And finally the third movement, the Presto, returning to the faster pace of the first — lighter of heart, a structure to it that seemed to promise a calmer, more ordered existence. No wonder I loved it; I was living it.

When I finished the instructors smiled and thanked me, impossible to read their expressions, but I didn't care — I knew I had done well, that I had exhibited both technique and feeling, and, more importantly, that I had done the best I was capable of. My parents, the professor, and I celebrated with an early dinner at Tavern on the Green, then took the 7:00 train back to Washington; and as the train cleaved the darkness around us, I felt as happy, as secure, as I had ever felt.

The feeling, of course, did not last long. I returned to school the next day, where I was judged — where I judged myself — on a different standard. Ever the outsider, I would walk alone from class to class, but all around me — in the halls, on the grounds, in the cafeteria — my echoes walked and talked and laughed with unseen others: friends I could not see, friends I would never know. Blonde Kathi was now a cheerleader, always laughing, always surrounded (I imagined) by hordes of well-wishers; I watched her flirt with unseen admirers and I wondered how she found the courage, I longed to do the same. Another echo, a flautist, walked by in her band uniform, nodding and talking to other (invisible) band members, and I coveted that uniform, the solidarity it represented; there was no place for a pianist in a high school band, and no time for me to learn another instrument. Even bratty, bitchy Katja seemed to have friends, God knew how; what was so wrong with *me*?

At night, as I lay in bed, it became harder and harder to ignore the echoes swarming in the darkness. The red-haired Kathy with perfect, genetically sculptured features undressed by my wardrobe closet, casting no reflection in the mirrored door, but I saw every perfect curve of her body outlined in the moonlight: full breasts where mine had barely budded, baby fat long gone, wavy hair cascading down her back. I looked away. The gymnast, tall and lithe, was doing yoga at the foot of my bed; she moved with grace and assurance, with a serene confidence in her body and herself that I lacked, that I envied. Glancing away, I caught a flickering glimpse

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of a male echo — not Robert or the mathematician but another boy, a football player I think — taking off his clothes. His image was vague and tenuous — a more remote potential for existence, I suppose — but I could still make out his wide shoulders, his muscled torso, thick penis hanging like a rope between his legs, and in a way I envied him too — his apparent strength, his male power. Sometimes it felt as though I lacked any power over my life, and he — and the gymnast, and the redhead — seemed to have so much strength, so much confidence. It wasn't fair. Any of them could have been me, I could have been them, *it wasn't fair.*

Dr. Carroll tried to convince me that I couldn't, shouldn't compare myself to the echoes; you can't hold yourself up, she said, to every infinite possibility, every unrealized ambition. I knew she was right, but I was feeling particularly insecure; it had been weeks since my audition in New York, and still no word from Juilliard. I told her I was afraid I might not get in, she assured me I would...and then, after a moment's hesitation, she added, "And even if you don't, there are other ways you can use your gifts."

I nodded; sighed. "I know. There are plenty of colleges with fine music departments around, but *Juilliard* — "

"I didn't mean your music," she said. "I meant your other gift."

I blinked, not understanding at first; I hardly thought of it as a *gift*. "What do you mean?" I asked, a bit warily.

She shrugged. "You have a unique skill, Kathy. You see possibilities. I know for a fact that there are others, with the same ability, who've put that talent to work."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"In research," she explained. "Think about it. In medical research, for instance, certain decisions are made in the course of an experiment; combinations of chemicals, of drugs, *chains* of combinations. Sometimes you work months, years, only to find out it's a dead end.

"But someone like you — simply by becoming *part of the experiment* — can change all that. You make one decision, one we may even know the outcome of in advance — and a whole spectrum of potential outcomes is created, echoes, some of which you may be able to communicate with. You could save weeks or months or years of precious work time, hasten the invention of cures, speed up the pace of science a hundredfold. People's

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lives might be saved who would otherwise die waiting for drugs to be developed, vaccines created."

It sounded like a sales pitch. I looked at her; my face must have been ashen. I thought of the flowered barrettes she had given me, and knew I would never be able to look at them again in the same way.

I stood up, feeling lost, feeling sick. "I have to go."

Realizing she'd overplayed her hand, Doctor Carroll stood as well. "Kathy — "

"I have to go." And I fairly well ran to the door, not listening to her frantic calls, and I never went back.

That night, the sobbing echo appeared again, crying herself to sleep in a corner of my bed; I lay in the dark, ear plugs a poor insulation from her cries, wanting desperately to take up her lament, to join her in her sad chorus, knowing I could not; I *must* not. As terrible as that night was, I told myself that the Adagio had to end sometime...didn't it?

WORD CAME two weeks later: I was accepted to Juilliard. I was ecstatic at the thought. Not just the opportunity to study at the world's most renowned college for the performing arts, but the chance to start fresh in a new city, a new school, where no one knew me and no one would ever call me "Nervie" again. Mother and Father went to New York with me to find me a place to live, no dorm rooms being available in Rose Hall; they were sad to see me leave Virginia, but jubilant that I had (they believed) overcome my "problems" and was "fulfilling my potential" — and their expectations.

After a week of apartment-hunting we finally found a small, unremarkable one-bedroom on West 117th Street, near Columbia University. Once, it had probably been a nice enough neighborhood; now it was somewhere between a funky off-campus environment and a war zone, with gangs, drugs, and streetwalkers a stone's throw from my building. My parents were quietly horrified, but as I stood there in the empty flat with its bare floors and scabrous walls, I felt almost delirious with joy: because the flat truly was empty, empty of echoes, of ghosts: for the first time in five years, *I was alone.* Over my parents' reservations I signed a one-year lease, went back to Virginia to pack and ship my belongings, and

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by summer's end was living in New York, truly "on my own" in a way my family could never comprehend. By moving here, I'd diverged from the paths the echoes were taking; this apartment, this life, was mine, and I had to share it with no one else. Oh, to be sure, once or twice I caught a glimpse of some small echo, a left turn instead of a right, a blue dress instead of a white one — but they disappeared quickly, like ripples on water; the worst of them, the Kathis and Katjas and Roberts, I had left well behind me. I rented a small piano, kept it in a place of honor in the living room, and began my new life.

In addition to classes in piano, I took courses in sight-singing and music theory (first semester, harmony; second, counterpoint), and it was in the latter class that I made my first real friend. His name was Gerald: warm eyes, a slightly sardonic smile, blond hair already receding a bit above a high forehead. A violinist, in his second year at Juilliard, I gathered he had already made something of a splash here; we got to talking, he invited me out for coffee after class.

It was evident, just in the way his eyes tracked men more than women as we walked across campus to a coffee shop on 65th Street, that Gerald was gay, and to be honest I was relieved; I had no experience at dating, and the concept was both exciting and daunting. Over coffee, Gerald said he'd like to hear me play, so we found an empty practice room in Rose Hall and I played the Chopin étude I had performed at my audition.

He seemed impressed. "How long have you been playing?" he asked.

"Since I was four."

He raised an eyebrow. "And I thought *I* was a prodigy. My parents started me on a half-size violin when I was five." He smiled, then said, "Why don't we try something together?"

We did — that day and every day for the next week. I was the stodgy traditionalist, Gerald the pop culture maven; in addition to classical pieces we collaborated on Gershwin, Copland, and a lovely violin concerto by the 20th century motion picture composer Miklós Rózsa. Gerald sight-read as quickly as I did, and for a while we tried to one-up each other with increasingly difficult pieces on a cold reading. Gerald didn't bat an eye — which started me wondering about him. I watched him more and more closely as he played — noticing that every once in a while he seemed...distracted; his head turning ever so slightly, as though hearing

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something just beyond his sight. It took me weeks to work up the courage to say something, but finally, over coffee one evening, the café we sat in nearly deserted, I found the nerve:

"Gerald?" My voice was soft, and it trembled a little. "Have you...I mean, do you ever...hear. Things?"

He looked at me, bemusedly. "Do I — hear? Things?"

I flushed with embarrassment. "Never mind. Forget I said — "

Quickly, he put a hand on mine. "No. It's all right. I...think I know what you mean."

My eyes widened. "You do?"

He nodded. As it turned out, I was right: Gerald and I had more in common than we first realized. Like me, he was gene enhanced — but unlike me, he had only partial vision when it came to echoes. "It's like when you look at something bright, a red stop light," he said, "and then you look away, and you see, just for a moment, a spot of green, because green is red's complementary color? That's what it's like for me. Complements, I call them; opposites. I only see them for a moment, and then they're gone."

"Lucky you," I said.

"Actually, I do feel lucky, at times. One of the first 'complements' I ever saw was a 'me' who was — don't ask me how I could tell this; I just *did* — a me who was straight. Not macho, just...hetero. I saw him look at something, and somehow I knew he was looking at a woman, and I just knew.

"And I realized, all at once, how fortunate I was. Because the doctors, they've known for years which genes incline us one way or the other, they had to have known which way I'd turn out...and my parents didn't 'correct' it, as they could have; as so many parents do these days. And I just felt very fortunate, that my parents — even if they did want a violinist — loved me enough to let me, in this one way at least, be myself."

I smiled, a bit wistfully, but before I could say anything Gerald suddenly leaned in: "Listen," and I could feel him changing the subject, perhaps uncomfortable with all this, "do you know Bach's *Musical Offering*?"

"Of course."

"I'm performing it in recital later this semester." His eyes were bright as he said it. "Me, another violinist, a cellist, a flautist, and a pianist. How'd you like to audition for it?"

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If I was disappointed that Gerald was only partly a kindred spirit, I quickly got over it; I was thrilled at the prospect, thrilled even to be asked. I agreed readily, spent the next several days being coached by Gerald; at the audition I competed with several other piano students, all of them quite gifted, but I felt no trepidation or fear: it was refreshing, exhilarating, to be competing with someone other than myself. With Gerald accompanying me on violin, I performed the sonata that was part of the *Offering* — and was stunned and delighted when, the next day, Gerald called to tell me I had, in his words, "gotten the gig"! "Now, of course," he said, deadpan, "we beat you senseless with practice for the next six weeks." I laughed. The only happier moment in my life was the day I was actually accepted to Juilliard.

A week later, another first: Chris, a cute dark-eyed boy in my sight-singing class, actually asked me out on a *date*. I was eighteen years old, ashamed to admit that I had never been on one before, trying to act casual as I said, "Sure. I'd love to." As soon as I got home I called Gerald and asked his advice. "Be yourself," he counseled, "and try not to bump into the furniture." I liked Gerald, but as a confidant he left something to be desired.

Chris took me to the campus Drama Theater, where students from the drama department were staging Edward Albee's *A Delicate Balance*. Chris put a hand gently on my arm as we made our way to our seats; I sat there, excited not just by his presence but by how very normal it all felt — by the prospect that perhaps, after all, I would have a normal life, filled with normal joys and only normal pains. I barely paid attention to the play, and it wasn't until almost the end of the first act — at the entrance of "Harry and Edna," the older couple so shaken with existential fear that they take refuge in their best friends' home — that I sat up and took notice.

Edna walked on stage, timid, fearful — and I gasped.

Edna was me.

Or at least one of them was. The actress portraying Edna in my world, the real world, was a short blonde; but in some other near-reality, *I* was playing the part. This echo was slightly taller than me, her hair somewhat lighter, and her form was translucent, shimmery, in the way I associated with the more remote echoes — separated from me by hundreds if not thousands of other potentialities.

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I heard the two actresses' voices transposed on one another, even their bodies occasionally superimposed, and I fought to keep calm when I really wanted to wail with grief, to mourn the loss of my newfound individuality: I'd thought I was alone, thought I had something to call my own, and now —

Tears welled in my eyes and I turned away, terrified to let Chris see. I fell back on old concentration techniques, trying not to watch the echo on stage; luckily it was near the end of the first act, and at intermission I ducked into the ladies' room to compose myself. Hands gripping the sink, I told myself I could not, would not, cry. Steeling myself for the rest of the play, I went back inside the auditorium with Chris...but it was even worse than I thought. When the curtain rose on Act Two, it came up on the character of Julia, the daughter...and that, too, was me.

A different me; short, plump, familiar features set in a round face, chubby arms waving angrily, in character. Oh, Jesus, I thought; oh, God, no. I managed to keep my despair from showing throughout all of that first scene, but when "Edna" appeared in the middle of the next one — when I saw two echoes of myself strutting about the stage, four different voices playing as though in quadraphonic stereo — my agitation started to show. Chris couldn't help but notice; I told him I wasn't feeling well, reluctantly we left the show, and in my discomfort I must have appeared distant and unfriendly, because he took me home, bussed me on the cheek, and never called again.

As I fell asleep that night, the sobbing echo returned for the first time in months, sitting in a corner of my previously untainted apartment — and, from that point on, never left...

I should have known; should have realized that my parents' ambitions for me would be so alike in so many other potential realities. In the weeks to come a day did not go by that I did not see at least one echo: Passing a dance class I caught a glimpse of a graceful, poised Katherine (Katrina, the instructor called her) at the ballet barre, dark hair in a chic chignon, long legs pirouetting flawlessly to *Swan Lake*, her face almost regal in its serenity. In my sight-singing class I heard my own voice drowned out by another, familiar in some ways but with a perfect pitch and soaring beauty I could never hope for; I saw her out of the corner of my eye, a Katherine who looked much like me but one who used the

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instrument of her voice better than I did my own piano, and I hated her.

I tried talking to Gerald about what was happening, but sympathetic as he tried to be, his "gift" was nowhere near as developed as mine, he truly didn't understand the full horror of what I was going through, and could offer no advice to help me cope with it. He seemed uncomfortable even talking about it, and after a few attempts I backed off, not wishing to lose a friendship, however flawed.

As I crossed campus one evening, on my way home, I caught a glimpse of Chris, heading alone toward the dormitories. I looked away, hoping he wouldn't see me, then, unable to resist, looked back for one last glance — and this time, he was no longer alone. This time, the air next to him boiled and shimmered with an echo of another Katherine — the dancer, Katrina, no mistaking the long legs, the regal face — her arm looped through his, her mouth open in a laugh. Chris — being in my world, of course — paid no attention to her, and after a few moments the dancer's form rippled and vanished; but I knew that in some other potential reality, another Chris walked with her, laughed with her, and I felt an anger and a compulsion rising within me.

I fell into step behind Chris, at a safe enough distance that he didn't notice. I knew I should turn around, knew I should go home right now, but I couldn't, and as he entered Rose Hall I poked my head in just long enough to determine which room was his. First floor; room six. I circled round the back of the dorm, found the window outside his room; crouched beside a concealing shrub, watched the light snap on inside. Carefully I raised myself up, peering into the window.

Chris was sitting at his desk, a small table lamp spilling light over textbooks and notepad computer. But though he did not realize it, he was not alone in the room. Less than five feet away, on his unmade bed, I saw her: the dancer: her nude body, toned and trim, lying on the sheets, her arms wrapped around something, someone, I could not see, her pelvis jerking back and forth, taking in that someone. She moaned; she cried out his name. *Chris*, she said, *oh, Chris*...It was almost comical; it was crushing, horrible. I felt as though I'd been physically struck; I stumbled backwards, gravel crunching noisily underfoot, away from Katrina, but her sighs and the sound of Chris's name seemed to follow me all the way home...

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That night, the sobbing echo in my apartment slowly stopped crying, falling into a silence I found even more disturbing; she sat in a corner, half-dressed, hair unwashed, staring into space. I tried not to meet her eyes — the irises a flat blue, dimmed by some cataract of spirit — their dead light constantly threatening to pull me in, pull me down...

Desperate to perform well at the Bach recital, I practiced as best I could, trying to ignore the echoes of better, more talented Katherines all around me. When the night arrived, I felt a twinge of an old excitement as I walked onto the stage at Alice Tully Hall wearing a simple but elegant white gown, joining an ensemble that included Gerald, another violinist, a flautist, a cellist, and myself.

The *Musical Offering* is a suite of tense, somber beauty, the first ricercare scored in this instance for piano; I played well, I thought, due in no small part to my affinity for the mood of the piece: a lament of sorts, perfectly in keeping with my own mood. We moved from the first ricercare to the canons which followed, my piano playing at times with one or more of the strings, strings and flute together, or not at all (as in the fourth canon, a duet between Gerald and the other violinist). It was during one such moment, as I "sat out" and listened to the other instruments, that I began to hear — faintly but distinctly — the sound of *another* piano. A piano taking the same part the cello was now playing; an echo from a reality in which this piece was arranged differently. The pianist, damn her, was brilliant, the technique letter-perfect. Her vigor and conviction so rattled me that I almost missed my entrance into the next ricercare, probably the most demanding part of the suite for me: I was not only performing it solo, I was playing six melodic lines all at the same time. Difficult under the best of circumstances — but now I heard the echo of that other piano, *my* piano, also performing the ricercare, but ever so slightly time-displaced (my other self having begun the piece moments before I had). The dissonance nearly drove me to distraction; for the next six and a half minutes I struggled to keep my concentration, I felt my gown growing embarrassingly wet with perspiration, and when I finally finished the ricercare I felt not triumph but mere relief — and then disgust, convinced that my performance had suffered for it. I got a bit of a breather in the next three canons, but when we came to the sonata I once more found myself playing, in some strange quantum duet, the same part as my

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echo — and once again, not playing it as well, the echo's rendering more controlled, the lamentation somehow deeper, truer, than mine. This was perhaps the bitterest pill of all to swallow: though I knew my share of torment, even at that there was someone better.

By the end of the recital I was drained, exhausted beyond anything I had ever known; and though everyone congratulated me on a fine performance, I took no joy in it, and fled home to my apartment, fighting the temptation to cry with sleep.

The next day I did not go to sight-singing class, for fear of hearing the Katherine with perfect pitch and soaring voice. I stayed at home and cranked up my stereo, *Mathis der Maler* again, in a desperate attempt to drown out the faintest whisper of any echoes.

The day after that I didn't go to piano class, terrified I might hear the same Katherine who had outclassed me in the recital. I stayed at home and left the television on all day, trying to fill the apartment with more acceptable ghosts, electronic ghosts, phosphor ghosts.

Gerald called, concerned at my absence from school. I told him that my mother was ill, that I was leaving that afternoon for Virginia, that I might be away for a while. He extended his sympathies and I took them. When he hung up, I switched on my answering machine and never turned it off. My parents left occasional messages and I answered them; keeping the conversations brief, pretending to a hectic schedule I didn't have, rushing off when I could no longer keep up the crushing pretense of normality.

I left the apartment less and less, leaving only to buy groceries and pay the rent. I spent more and more of each day in bed, but, asleep, I seemed not to dream myself but to share the dreams of others: vivid, highly visual dreams filled with color and form, Robert's dreams; pleasant, happy dreams, the inner life of the gorgeous, red-headed Kathy, prosaic but peaceful; jarring, violent dreams of conflict and competition, Katja's dreams; dreams of movement and physicality, the gymnast's dreams. At first I found them disturbing; slowly they became a kind of narcotic, as I realized that through them I could, however briefly and incompletely, *become* my echoes. The redhead's confidence, the gymnast's grace, the ordered geometry of the math major's mind. One moment I'm the football player, reliving the glories of a touchdown, a thirty-yard pass, beer after

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the game, fast sweaty sex with my girlfriend, my penis swelling inside her; the next moment I'm the singer, hearing/feeling the resonance in my voice, shaping the sound, diaphragm relaxed, the peculiar but satisfying sensation of being my own instrument; a moment later my body is still my instrument but this time I manipulate it not just with voice but with posture, expression, movement, an actress's devices.

I drift from dream to dream, mind to mind, the casual clutter of the actress's thoughts, the laser-sharp focus of Katja's, the passion and discipline of Katrina's, all a welcome respite from me, from *being* me, and more and more I'm *not* me, I'm *them*; I'm only me when I have to be, when my body demands it. Asleep, I feel a pressure in my bladder and reluctantly I wake, dragging myself to the bathroom, relieving myself, sometimes getting something to eat, sometimes not, then returning to bed. This goes on for days; weeks. And then one day, amidst dreams of being smarter, prettier, happier, more talented, I feel my body call and grudgingly answer, padding to the bathroom, doing what's necessary, glancing into the vanity mirror on my way back to bed —

And I stopped, suddenly shaken by what I saw.

The Katherine in the mirror was half-dressed, her hair unruly and unwashed, with a dead light in her flat blue eyes that threatened to pull me in; pull me down. It was the echo who'd first appeared in the hospital, so many years before; who'd lain in a corner of my bed in Virginia and cried her lament of long years; who joined me here, in New York, and whose sobs slowly gave way to silence and gray despair, in her eyes an ancestral memory of my grandfather.

But the echo wasn't sitting in the corner. The echo was in my mirror.

I felt a surge of panic, the first emotion in weeks I hadn't dreamed, hadn't borrowed. I looked desperately around the apartment, hoping I was wrong — hoping to catch a glimpse of the echo, somewhere else in the apartment — but the echo wasn't there.

Of course she wasn't. I'd *become* the echo.

Once, we had been separated by countless other probability lines; other paths, the ones closest to me diverging only slightly, the ones closest to her diverging more. Slowly, subtly, I had traveled from one path to the next, like fingers moving absently from key to key on my piano, drawing closer and closer to her probability line...until it became mine. I had made

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the transition so slowly, so gradually, that I hadn't even realized it was happening.

At first I couldn't accept it. It wasn't true; this couldn't be happening! I raced out of the bedroom into the living room, still hoping, praying, that I might *see* my echo, that *I* wasn't her —

I didn't see her in the living room, of course. But I saw someone else.

I saw a Katherine who looked very much as I had, once: short dark hair, well-groomed, neatly dressed...with bright, clear, sky-blue eyes, undimmed by time or pain. She was sitting at the piano, playing the Largo movement from the *Musical Offering*, and for a moment I thought she might have been the echo I'd heard on stage at the recital; but as I got close enough to see her fingers on the keys, close enough to recognize my own style, I knew that she was not.

I looked into her face, and was shocked by what I saw; what I thought I saw.

Contentment? Peace? It had been so long since I had known anything like either, I wasn't sure I recognized them. I tried to think when I had last felt such contentment, and I thought of the day I had moved in here, the joy I'd felt, the promise of a brighter, happier life.

My heart sank. This Kathy, this echo in front of me — *she* had lived that happier life. The life that should have been mine. The probability line *I* should have traveled — but I veered from it, taking a darker path.

My legs gave way beneath me, I dropped to the floor, and I cried. For how long, how many minutes or hours, I can't tell you now. But toward the end of it, as I gave up the grief I'd held for too long, I began to understand something. Something I should have realized years before:

Some of my echoes were the result of chance; but others were a product of choice. I didn't choose to be a musical prodigy — that was determined for me. But *I* had chosen to become what I was now: the sobbing echo. However unwittingly, *I had chosen that.* I had *had* that choice.

And if I had it then — I still did.

I *still* had a choice.

I did. I did.

There is an old, famous experiment — one of the first to imply the existence of probability waves — which I read about in my sessions with

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Doctor Carroll: Shoot a spray of electrons through two slits in a wall, onto a video screen where their impact can be recorded. The result? An interference pattern from the overlapping waves of electrons. Fine; that much makes sense. But shoot just one electron at a time through a slit, then look later at the cumulative pattern — and you find the identical interference pattern. Impossible, on the face of it: the electrons, having been projected one at a time, haven't actually overlapped. But apparently the thousands of potential electron paths exist, on a quantum level, with the one path the electron actually does travel — and they somehow influence it, limiting the paths the single electron can take.

It took me a long while to realize it, but in a way, I was like that electron: for too long, I allowed the thousands of potential lives I might have led to limit, to proscribe, the life I *was* leading. Seeing the echoes of all I might have been, it was easy to forget that I was not just one of them; that they in fact emanated from me, not simply from that one moment of genetic manipulation but from every moment thereafter as well. Human beings, unlike electrons, have free will — and I soon decided to exert it with a vengeance.

I dropped out of Juilliard and enrolled at a small college in upstate New York, leaving the majority of my quantum ghosts behind in Manhattan. My parents were appalled at the move; even more so when I elected not to major in music, but to keep an open major, at least for a year or two. I took classes in art, in literature, in anthropology, any and all subjects that interested me — and was amazed to discover that I had both an affinity and an aptitude for something outside music. I would never have Robert's artistic skills, but I could, in fact, draw passably well, if only for my own amusement; I might never have the dancer's grace at a ballet barre, but I *could* dance, I was not a hopeless klutz. I might never have the red-haired Kathy's drop-dead, fashion-model looks — but I *was* pretty. I really was.

Because I had been designed from birth to be a musician, I had decided, like the electron, that there was only one path for me to take; and having discovered that that was not the case, I've had a richer, more interesting life than I might otherwise have dreamed. I've climbed mountains in Nepal; I've ridden Irish thoroughbreds in County Monaghan. I've been married, had two children; I've written a sonata for violin and piano for my old friend Gerald, and illustrated a computer-generated children's book

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for my four-year-old daughter. In my youth, I naively believed that life could be, should be, structured like a concerto: today I know better. I know that life is andante and presto and adagio, all entwined, a fugue of sorts, the promise and the sadness often separated by mere moments, tragedy and serenity not nearly so discrete as I once believed. And I've known my share of both.

Through all of it, my echoes have never been far away: they are not far from me now. Now old like me, they surround me as I write this — one of them also sitting at a computer, not writing but painting; one of them playing a snatch of Gershwin on a flute; another at the piano; still another simply sitting and weeping, over what I am not quite sure. Occasionally, in big cities, I catch glimpses of others: I saw Robert on a street in Dallas and I think he recognized me, throwing me a Cheshire smile before vanishing; I went to the ballet in New York and was surprised to find Katrina performing a ghostly turn as Aurora in *The Sleeping Beauty*, and I felt a surge not of envy but of pride. My echoes are no longer tormentors but friends, and when one of them dies (as, inevitably, they have begun to) I mourn a little, as I would a sister. Each one, to be sure, still represents a different path, a different life. But the joy, the wonder, of it all is this: I have taken one path, but many turns; I was granted one life, but lived many lives. The paths, the roads, may be infinite and beautiful; but the journey is even more so.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

JUNE BRINGS WITH IT a change of season, and as summer approaches we have a host of great stories to usher in the long and lazy days.

Indeed, what better month than June to learn from Ron Goulart "Why I Never Went Steady with Heather Moon"? Here the ever-witty Mr. Goulart takes us through modern life and love on a college campus . . . and did we mention demons? Yes, demons. It's great fun and there are even a few life lessons to help out this year's graduating class.

Our cover story from Robert Reed is "Graffiti," a dark tale of two friends and a small town with a strange secret underground. Once you've read the writing on this wall, you're not likely to forget it.

Kit Reed lets us accompany the Minneapolis Adventure Club next month on a trip to India in "Rajmahal." Pack carefully, however—you never know who you'll meet.

Next month will also see the return of Robert Killheffer's Books column, and in the coming months we'll have some new columnists for you, along with fabulous fiction from the likes of Nancy Etchemendy, Brian Stableford, Lisa Goldstein, and Dale Bailey. You won't want to miss any of it.

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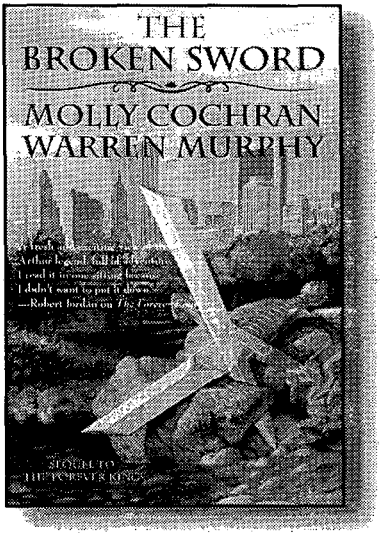

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